

Between Daylight and Darkness

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Relationships:

Toby Domzalski & Jim Lake Jr. & Claire Nuñez & Darci Scott & Mary Wang, Toby Domzalski & Jim Lake Jr., Claire Nuñez & Darci Scott & Mary Wang, Barbara Lake & Jim Lake Jr., Blinkous "Blinky" Galadrigal & Jim Lake Jr., Aaarrggghh/Blinkous "Blinky" Galadrigal

Characters:

Jim Lake Jr. (Tales of Arcadia), Toby Domzalski, Claire Nuñez, Mary Wang, Darci Scott, Barbara Lake, Blinkous "Blinky" Galadrigal, Aaarrggghh (Tales of Arcadia), Draal (Tales of Arcadia), Vendel (Tales of Arcadia), Walter Strickler | Stricklander

Additional Tags:

Alternate Universe - Sunshine au, Troll Jim Lake Jr., Magic, Found Family, Canon-Typical Violence, Worldbuilding, Magic has rules and fantasy creatures have evolutionary biology, Angst, Trauma, Arcadia quintet, Updates every four weeks, No ai was using in the making of this story, Feed this story into an ai and I feed your kneecaps into a woodchipper

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English

Series:

Part 3 of [Sunshine through the Clouds](#)

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Between Daylight and Darkness

by [rosemaidenvixen](#)

Summary

Jim's life has been tumultuous from the start, he's been through some rough times but came out ok on the other side. Now with his friends by his side he feels ready to take on anything.

Then he finds a mysterious object in the canals that turns his life upside down. And as the five of them dig deeper into the mysteries in and underneath their town they're forced to question everything they thought they knew about the world and their place in it.

They quickly discover that secret knowledge and sacred responsibility go hand in hand, and the deeper they delve into the hidden world beneath Arcadia the more threats they uncover. Enemies and new dangers lurking around every corner. And with every foe they conquer a new one seems to reveal themselves. The further and further they go the more they find themselves irreversibly altered by these new experiences. And if the five of them want to protect each other and their loved ones they'll have to find a way to embrace these changes while staying true to themselves.

However there's far more at stake here than their five little lives, and soon they'll be grappling with choices could that affect not only the world around them, but all those living in it.

Notes

At long last the final installment of the sunshine au is here! While the other two installments were pre-canon this story will cover all the events of Tales of Arcadia from Trollhunters through the movie that shall not be named. I've got a lot planned and am super excited to share it all.

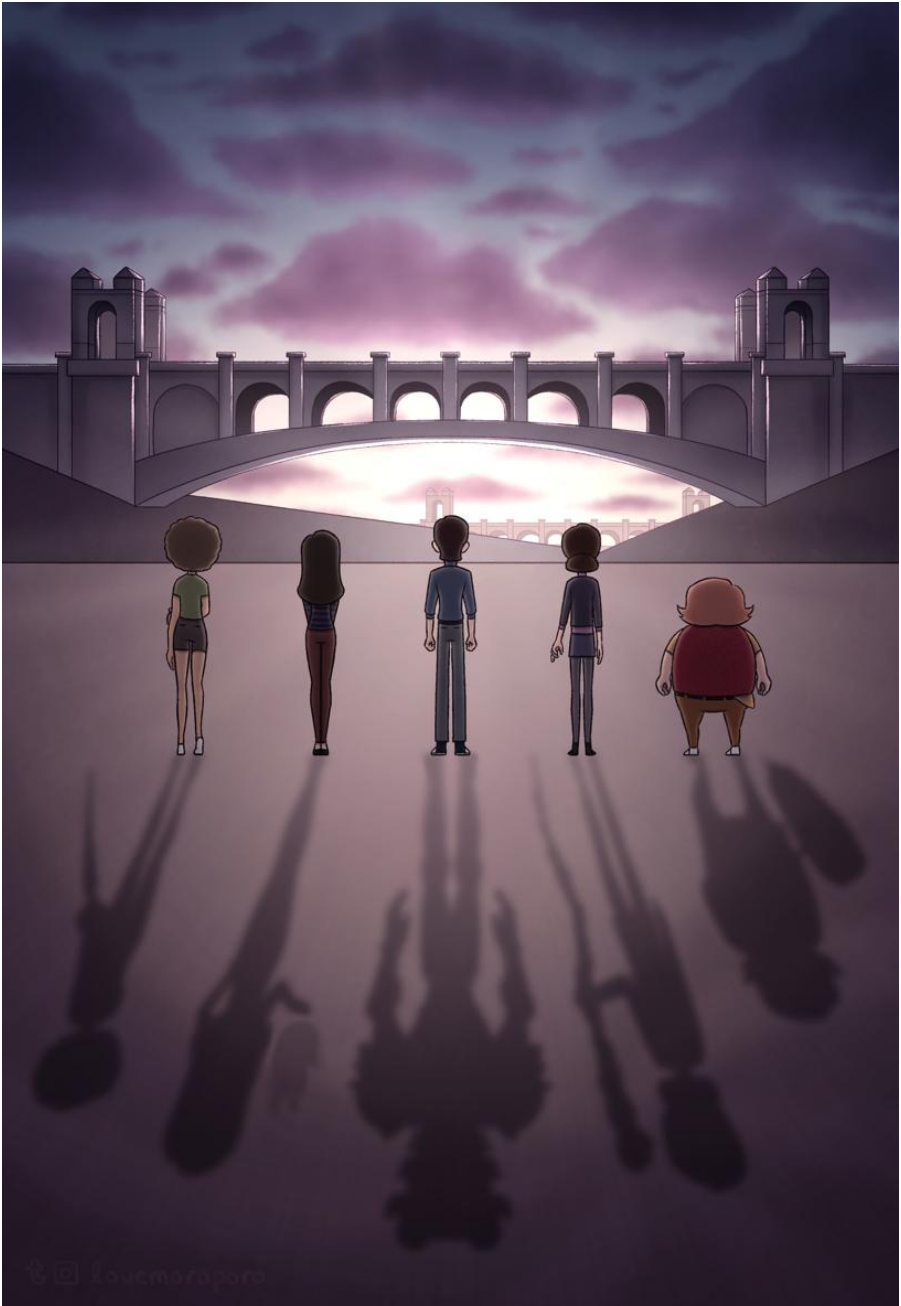
Enjoy!

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

Chapter 1: Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



“You have any idea what this is about?”

“Nope, Toby just said that Jim found something unusual and wants to meet up at his house to check it out,” Mary glanced down at her phone, rereading the text message that said as much.

First Jim ran out during the middle of history class, acting cagey the rest of the day, and now this. With the events of the past year fresh in her mind, she'd done her best not to push beyond asking if he was ok. Which Jim had brushed off with 'I'll tell you later'.

An honest answer for sure, but not a particularly reassuring one. Toby had promised to talk to him one on one later, which brought them all here. Obviously they weren't going to push Jim if it was something private. But Mary would be lying if she said she wasn't dying for some answers.

The three of them headed up the front steps of Jim's house, Claire stepping forward to knock on the door. And after hearing Toby call 'It's unlocked', let themselves inside.

Heading into the house, Mary saw Jim and Toby sitting in the living room, Jim clutching something shiny in his hands.

“Hey guys,” Darci tossed her bag aside and took a seat on the couch, Mary and Claire doing the same “What's up?”

Jim hung his head and let out a shaky breath “So this morning, I overheard Eli saying something,”

“He better not be trying to get into the school’s basement again,” Mary mumbled.

The last time Eli’d tried to uncover the secret mafia treasure stash buried underneath the school, which by the way, didn’t exist, he’d busted a pipe and the entire school had to be evacuated and classes had been canceled for a week and a half while they mopped up the water and fixed everything.

She was honestly surprised he hadn’t gotten suspended for that.

“No not that, Eli was saying...he said on his way to school he saw monsters fighting under the canal bridge. Monsters with stone for skin.”

Just like that the atmosphere of the room shifted from casual to tense. All four of them sitting up at attention, eyes locked on Jim.

Claire ever so slightly eased herself forward “So were you...”

“That’s just the thing,” Jim propped himself up with his hands on his knees, looking around and meeting each of their gazes in turn “I was nowhere near the canals this morning. I stayed inside until I changed, then headed to Main Street to stop at the bakery and took the long way to school,”

Mary let out a small breath, tension she hadn’t even realized was building between her shoulders uncoiling. No one had spotted him, Jim was in the clear and his secret was safe. But this particular coincidence still cut far too close for comfort.

“Then later, during history class I heard something...someone calling my name. It kept getting louder and no one else could hear it but me so I ran out and followed it–”

Jim cut himself off and pulled in a deep breath “I followed it to the canal bridge, and I found *this* ,”

He reached out and dropped something on the coffee table with a clang.

“This was the thing calling my name, I pulled it out of a pile of rubble underneath the bridge, it hasn’t said anything since,”

Jim sat back as the rest of them leaned in, staring down at the object on the table.

If she’d heard this story from anyone besides this specific friend group Mary would have laughed in their face and told them to come up with a more believable prank. Mary wasn’t laughing now.

Jim would *never* joke about something like this. And all five of them had seen far stranger things than talking inanimate objects.

Claire reached an arm out then hesitated “Can I...”

“Sure go ahead,”

Permission granted, Claire plucked the object up and held it up close to her face to examine it. Darci and Mary leaned in over her

shoulders, watching with keen interest as Claire turned the object over in her hands.

“It kind of looks like...a pocket watch, or some kind of clock,”

Mary was inclined to agree, the object was a circle about the size of a phone, silvery metal framework and hands around a shimmering blue face with writing around the edge. But that was where the similarities ended. The language written on it wasn't any Mary recognized, looking more like fantasy runes than anything else, the gears and hands inside enmeshed together in a jumbled mess unlike any clock Mary had ever seen.

Claire glanced up from the object back towards Jim “Can I try something?”

“Go ahead,”

She turned her gaze back down, raising a single finger to push at the largest hand “If I can just—”

Without warning the object *shot* straight out of Claire's hands, making all of them jump, slamming into Jim's chest and knocking him back against the couch with a grunt.

Before any of them even had a chance to react the object started whirling where it was pressed up against Jim's shirt. Gears spinning and hands ticking faster than Mary's eyes could track, blue face flashing behind them, faster and faster and faster—

Abruptly the object froze with a resounding click.

A glowing ball of light drifted out of the object, all of them watching frozen in shock as the ball drifted up and vanished into Jim's chest. Before she could even process what she'd just seen another ball of light floated out and drifted into Jim, then another, then two more—

Mary felt a scream building in the back of her throat, only to be cut off in a strangled gulp as the entire room *lurched* .

Her fingers dug into the couch cushionings, desperately trying to steady herself as a wave of dizziness rocked into her. And when she saw strands of her hair drifting up and around her face, swaying in the completely still room, she knew that the sensation wasn't just in her head. Pens, coasters, and various other small objects drifting up into the air around her.

Claire was able to anchor herself to, but Toby, Darci, and Jim weren't so lucky, floating up off the ground with shouts and yelps. Floundering in the air along with lighter pieces of furniture.

Mary's heart was in her throat, stomach doing flip flops, if she looked in the wrong direction or even thought about what was actually happening she was going to throw up. From out of nowhere there was a sudden burst of light in the air around Jim. And when Mary looked again a piece of metal, the same silver as the object, materialized in the air in front of him, then another flash, then another, light and metal filling the air around him.

Seeing the shape of the metal surrounding him Mary's brain started to connect several sets of dots, but before the picture could take shape in her mind all the metal flew towards Jim in a blinding flash, knocking them all back and returning gravity to the room in an instant.

Mary sagged back onto the couch with a gasp of relief. Breath coming in sharp pants and trembling all over, fingers still in a death grip on the cushions. She shook her head to try and clear her vision only to freeze.

Jim was now standing there in the wrecked living room in a shining silver suit of armor, a large sword strapped to his back and the round object embedded in his chest plate. Staring at his gauntleted arms with eyes blown wide and jaw hanging open.

For a few seconds no one spoke. All of them, Jim included, standing there completely stupefied.

The silence was broken when Toby let out a low whistle.

“Now *that’s* what I call magic,”

Mary’s heart was still hammering, brain still reeling, dizziness from earlier not yet fully dissipated, but curiosity overpowered the shock and she pried her fingers off the couch and stood up.

This wasn’t any kind of costume or cardboard imitation, this was full on real deal metal plate armor. Enough to make Jim the envy of every history and ren fair nerd in the state. And that sword didn’t look like it was for show either.

Toby rapped his knuckles against his chest, producing a metallic ringing sound “Ok did any of the things you saw or heard this morning imply ‘magical suit of armor’?”

“...no I can confidently say that this came out of nowhere,”

“I’m kind of surprised you’re being so chill about this,” Mary walked up and leaned in to examine the object embedded in his chestplate, now softly ticking.

Jim let out an awkward chuckle “Oh I’m doing all my freaking out internally,”

“How do we know for sure that the armor itself is magic?” Claire joined them “For all we know it’s just a regular suit of armor,”

One of Darci’s eyebrows arced up “Claire I’m pretty sure that regular suits of armor don’t appear out of thin air,”

“But maybe it’s just the watch that’s magical and it summons a regular suit of armor?”

“Hang on I think I know a way to test that,” Toby rushed out of the room “Be right back,”

“Ok let’s just table the armor and its potential magical properties for the moment and go back to this,” Jim pointed at the object now embedded in his chestplate “What is it? Where did it come from? Why does it summon a suit of armor of all things!?”

Mary stepped in closer then froze once she spotted something on the watch, leaning her face right up towards Jim’s chest to make sure her eyes weren’t playing tricks on her.

“Uh Mary what–”

“The writing, on the watch, it’s in english now,”

“What!? What does it say?”

Mary squinted, craning her neck to read the circular script.

“For the glory of...Merlin...Daylight...is...mine...to...command...”

“Merlin!?” Darci started “Like ye olden times Camelot Merlin? I thought he was just a myth,”

“Most historians agree that Merlin existed as some kind of advisor to Arthur,” Claire sided up to Mary to stare at the object herself “But all the stories about him having magical powers were supposed to be exaggera-”

“I’m back!” Toby rushed into the room “With the proper equipment for scientific analysis,”

Toby came up to Jim and placed something against his armored shoulder. As soon as he took his hand away the object fell to the ground. Expression scrunched in concentration, Toby repeated the action twice with the same effect.

Mary glanced down at the objects gathering in a pile at Jim’s feet, it took a few seconds for her to recognize them as fridge magnets.

“Uh...Tobes what exactly are magnets supposed to tell us?”

“Traditional plate armor is steel based,” Toby said, placing another magnet on Jim’s chest only to have it immediately slide to the ground “Which means that these should at least stick a little, so the only explanation is this armor doesn’t have any steel in it at all,”

“So what would it be made of?” Darci stepped closer “Silver?”

“It’d be pretty crappy armor if it was made of silver,” Claire said “Platinum or titanium maybe?”

Toby grabbed Jim’s arm and lifted it up, bending the elbow back and forth “I’d have to do more testing to be sure, but I’m pretty sure it’s not any of those three. If it was silver I’d expect at least a little tarnish, and it feels way too light to be platinum or titanium,”

Jim huffed out a breath “Ok guys as fun as this all is I gotta take a break to—”

Abruptly he went ramrod straight, face going chalky.

“Jim?” Mary took half a step away from him “Jim what’s wrong?”

“I change in five minutes,”

“Oh....kay....”

“Guys there’s a reason I get undressed when I change. If just growing while wearing jeans sucks a suit of armor’s going to be....”

Mary could pinpoint the exact second everyone’s expressions changed from confusion to pure horror, hers included.

Oh *shit*.

“Ok we’ll get it off we gotta get it off,” Toby reached up, grabbed Jim’s chestplate and started tugging at it, Darci scrambled around and did the same at his back. But despite the two of them pulling with all of their might the armor wasn’t budging.

“Hang on I think I have an idea,” Claire dashed out of the room, the two of them still frantically pulling and straining at the armor while Jim stood awkwardly between them

Mary hung back, if Toby and Darci’s yanking wasn’t doing the trick hers wouldn’t make a difference. She kept trying to think around this, how was the armor attached, what was holding it in place–

“Step back!” Claire rushed back into the room, a metal spatula grasped tight in her hand. Toby barely had enough time to scramble out of the way as Claire charged at Jim, wedging the spatula underneath the object.

“Hang on,” Claire pressed the handle down further “Almost–”

Blue light erupted from the object, rocking the room with a wave of concussive energy, much stronger than the earlier one. Throwing couches and tables aside and slamming all four of them back.

Mary's back hit the wall with bruising force, the air knocked from her lungs and vision flickering, a pained wheeze escaping her as she crumpled to the ground.

"Guys!" Jim raced around, whipping his head around the room towards each of them "Are you ok!?"

"Fine," Mary's voice came out coarser than she would have liked, gripping the side of an upturned bookshelf and pulling herself to her feet "Just a little bruised,"

The tension didn't leave Jim's face, glancing around at all of them and the scattered furniture "What the heck was– *hrk* ,"

Mary knew Jim more or less shapeshifted from human to his blue horned form every sunset, even if she'd never personally seen it happen. But she'd been around Jim enough that she knew the process had to be quick, even if it involved growing horns.

The reality was even faster than she expected.

It reminded her of the time lapse edits in documentaries, showing tectonic plates pushing flat land into towering mountains over millions of years in a matter of seconds.

Pale skin darkened into blue, limbs lengthening and thickening, facial features shifting, fangs and horns appearing as rapidly and gently as frost disappearing. If she'd blinked at the wrong time she would have missed it.

She was so dazzled by Jim's transformation it took her a few seconds to notice something equally shocking.

"Dude..." Toby whispered "The armor..."

Jim didn't look up, busy staring down at his hands and arms, or more likely the armor that now fit them perfectly.

Somehow the armor had *grown* along with the rest of him.

"Ok, wow..." Darci whispered "That armor is *definitely* magic,"

Jim glanced up "Yeah I...I guess it is,"

Mary didn't say anything but her mind was going a mile a minute. She didn't have all the pieces yet, none of them did. But between the armor being able to 'magically' accommodate both of his forms and Eli's claims of creatures of stone skin near where Jim found it, she had a gut feeling that whatever this object and armor were, they were connected to the magic that made Jim change every sunset and sunrise.

Now they just had to figure out how.

Chapter End Notes

Cover art by [@lovemoroporo](#) on tumblr

Chapter 2: Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

For those of you who haven't seen it yet, I've commissioned cover art for this story that's now attached to the first chapter, so please go back and check it out. This art was done by [@lovemoroporo](#), they've done a lot of other amazing fanart so please go check them out on tumblr.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Blinky's feet scuffled against the well worn stone as he paced back and forth. The already narrow space was crowded enough with the bodies of him and the two other trolls without his scurrying about, but despite knowing that couldn't find it in himself to stop his frantic movements.

"This is a disaster! A catastrophe! *An absolute calamity!* " he threw his arms out, one of them knocking against a tray of tools on the edge of the work table and sending them clattering to the floor.

"Blinkous!" Vendel said sharply " *Compose yourself,*"

"How can I compose myself when it's been three days, *three days* with no sign of the amulet or our new trollhunter!"

AAARRRGHH lumbered closer, flashing a hopeful smile "Maybe new Trollhunter...slow?"

"Or maybe they got trapped by the sun, or maybe a goblin stole the amulet before they could find it, *or maybe Bular found it and he's preparing to march on Trollmarket as we spe –*"

His tirade was cut off by a firm hand being placed on his shoulder, Blinky reflexively turning to look up at Vendel's stern gaze.

"If Bular had the amulet, believe me Blinkous we would *know* . I admit the situation is dire, but we have faced worse before, and above all else we can't afford to lose our heads to panic,"

Blinky felt his chest tighten, immediately chastised "Of course of course, forgive me,"

Vendel's grip on his shoulder loosened, and if he knew the older troll one iota less than he did Blinky would have missed the subtle softening of his gaze "It's alright Blinkous, there's nothing to forgive,"

Blinky's guts gave an uncomfortable lurch. An objection rose up in the back of his throat, choking it back down before it could escape.

That wasn't true, and they both knew it.

Both Blinky and AAARRRRGGHH had been there to witness Kanjigar's fall from the shadows of a sewer tunnel. Powerless to do anything but bear witness to their Trollhunter's final moments.

Kanjigar's death was a steady ache in his side, it would be many a year before the pain of his loss faded, if it ever did, but that was a pain Blinky could bear. Part and parcel of being Trollhunter was accepting that one day there may be a battle you did not walk away from. And as much as Kanjigar's death had wounded them all, they'd made their peace with it long ago.

No, Blinky's unforgivable crime was failing to preserve the

Trollhunter's— his *friend's* legacy.

It had sat only a few precious feet away, but with the sunlight flooding the canal it may as well have been at the bottom of the sea. They'd kept vigil over it until the steadily rising sun forced them further into the tunnel and out of sight of the amulet. But those few hours had been enough. By the time the daylight had receded from the canal it had been too late. Kanjigar's remains had been pilfered by unknown hands and the amulet was lost.

With heavy hearts they gathered Kanjigar's remains and brought them home, his legacy looted and lost to the surface.

The absolute worst was when they'd relayed these events to Vendel. Trollmarket's elder had sat patiently and listened without interruption, then when they'd finished there hadn't even been a trace of anger on him, his expression unbearably sad.

It was only then that Blinky realized the true magnitude of his failure.

"The ways of Merlin and his amulet have always been mysterious," Vendel released Blinky's shoulder to step towards his work table, gathering the fallen tools "While we may not know when or how the amulet will return to us it *will* choose a champion, we just have to be patient,"

AAARRRGHH let out a soft grumble and nodded at the elder troll, before moving closer to Blinky "Vendel right, amulet does as amulet choses, it not up to Blinky where amulet goes,"

Blinky's throat went tight with emotion "Thank you, both of you I—"

The thudding of approaching troll feet echoing in from the entrance tunnel interrupted him. All three trolls immediately fell silent, turning and fixing their gazes on the tunnel entrance just as Draal emerged.

The words ‘Did you find it’ hung on the edge of Blinky’s tongue, only held back with extraordinary willpower. But as soon as he saw him the question withered and died without ever leaving his mouth, one glance at the look on the younger troll’s face and it was clear he’d had no more luck than they had.

“I’ve been to every neighboring community and tribe in the area. There’s been no sign of the amulet or word of a new Trollhunter,”

A small sigh of disappointment accompanied Draal’s words, so slight Blinky might have missed it had he not known the troll since he was a hatchling, a new cluster of thorny emotions sprouting to life in his chest.

Draal’s desire to be his father’s successor was known to all of Trollmarket, but Kanjigar’s desire for the exact opposite was known to only a few, namely the four trolls in this room. Blinky found himself of two minds on the matter. He had no desire to watch a troll he’d watch grow from a hatchling be thrown into battles risking life and limb. But Draal hadn’t been a whelp for centuries, he was a grown troll and a blooded warrior, what right did Blinky or even Kanjigar himself have to choose his path for him?

But it was a testament to Blinky’s own weakness that he would have been glad to see Draal take up the amulet become the next Trollhunter if only to end this awful uncertainty.

“Then we must continue the search,” Vendel said, voice solemn.

Blinky nodded in response “AAARRGGHH and I will continue to scour the surface,”

“And I will begin my inquiries anew,” Draal added “See if there has been any change, and if there has not I will expand my search to every community this side of the continent. We shall not rest until the amulet is found,”

Vendel looked at each of them in turn “Good. And do not lose faith. No matter how long it takes the amulet *will* return to us, and bring with it a new champion,”

Chapter End Notes

Bit of a shorter chapter, but important for setting the stage for things underground.

For updates on this story I'm planning on posting every four weeks on Monday, if I ever have to deviate from this schedule unexpectedly I'll post an announcement on my tumblr.

Coming May 27th: Jim and the others try to uncover more about the mysterious object he's discovered, but only end up uncovering more questions.

Chapter 3: Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Toby gripped the edge of his desk, eyeing the door into the room uneasily.

He leaned over towards Mary keeping his gaze on the door “Were you guys able to make any...progress yesterday?”

Mary’s expression turned pinched “No.”

A lead weight dropped in Toby’s gut.

That first night they all stayed as late as they possibly could to try and help, but they’d still had no luck in prying the armor off of Jim. Eventually Jim told them to go home and sleep and try to solve this tomorrow. But the next day he texted them that he was still stuck in the armor and was going to have to skip school. Toby had an orthodontist appointment and couldn’t see him after, but the girls had gone over to his place to try and troubleshoot, only to leave in defeat. The girls had kept him updated through text, but ever since yesterday afternoon it’d been radio silence from Ji–

The door swung open and Jim, dressed in jeans and a jacket and not a trace of armor, hurried into the room and took his seat next to them.

Toby slumped back in his chair, letting out a gusty sigh. Good to see Jim was ok and not sealed up like a tin can.

“Glad you made it in,” Claire leaned forward with a whisper “But how did you finally manage to get that armor off?”

Jim groaned and dragged a hand over his face, heavy shadows under his eyes “I don’t even know. I’ve been pulling and tugging at it all night then an hour ago it randomly popped off,”

Darci blinked “Umm...you did go to sleep after we left, right?”

“Nope,” Jim said with a pop “But I should be fine. I’ve gone all night without sleep before. I can’t do it a bunch of days in a row, but if I get plenty of sleep the next few days I’ll be fine,”

“Well don’t forget,” Mary cut in “Today we’re meeting up with Ms. Janeth to try and convince her to let you work on the play but cut out early,”

Jim slumped on top of his desk and groaned “Oh man don’t remind me,”

Toby patted his shoulder “Don’t worry, we’ll convince her,”

“Either that or I’ll make a complete fool of myself and get kicked out of drama club and become the laughing stock of the whole school, again,”

“That’s it, you know what the penalty for ripping on yourself is,” Toby stretched out of his seat to lean over and reach into Jim’s bag “I get to use your good pen for the rest of...”

Toby froze, eyes going huge “What the *heck* Jim!?” he hissed.

Jim jerked upright “Wha?”

“You brought the magical armor summoning pocket watch to school!?”

“What? No I left it at home in my des–” Jim moved over to look into his bag, only to instantly go still when he saw the shiny silver and blue object nestled between notebooks, face draining of color.

For a few seconds none of them moved, all staring at the pocket watch in disbelief, then the object let out a loud click, flashing blue.

“ *Nopenopenope*, ” Jim scrambled to close the bag, shoving it underneath his seat “Not doing that,”

At the front of the room Mr. Strickler stood up from his desk and moved in front of the chalk board, signaling the end of the passing period and start of the lesson. Conversations all over the room dying into silence.

Mary angled over towards Jim and risked one more soft whisper “I think going all night without sleep might be messing with your head,”

“You might be onto something there...” Jim mumbled.

Toby knew he should stay quiet, both for keeping the magic on the down low and to not risk Mr. Strickler’s wrath, but the question

wouldn't leave his head and he absolutely had to know.

"So if you were stuck in that armor for two days how did you go to the bathroom?"

"Dude you don't want to know,"

"...so that's what we were thinking, sound good?"

Toby fought to keep the wide grin on his face, feeling the others shifting behind him as Ms. Janeth tapped her chin thoughtfully. She had to say yes, she just had to. Sure they were bending the rules a little, more than a little, but nothing to—

"I think we should be able to make that work,"

Jim perked up instantly "Really?"

"Of course," Ms. Janeth stood from her desk with a smile "The fine art of theater should be shared with all! And while I have limited resources at my disposal, I'm always happy to make things more accessible,"

"That's great," Claire said with a wide grin. The five of them glancing around smiling at each other in relief.

"Always happy to welcome new blood aboard our cast, however..."

Ms. Janeth swiftly turned and picked up a clipboard from her desk
“Try outs are in the auditorium in fifteen minutes. So those of you that are aiming for speaking roles had better beat me there,”

They all piped up with ‘got it’s and ‘thank you’s and ‘see you there’ as they headed out of Ms. Janeth’s room.

“Sooo...I’m not trying out for anything, but is it cool if I watch you guys try out?” Jim said hopefully.

“Well duh,” Mary flicked her eyes towards the ceiling “You’re our emotional support, very important,”

Darci snickered “Of course, can’t be reciting memorized lines with any fewer than three people in the audience cheering you on,”

“Actually...would you guys be ok if I skipped out on this one?”

Four sets of eyes turned towards Toby, who flashed a nervous grin back at them.

“I want to raid the science lab for some supplies to test Jim’s...bag,”

Claire blinked “It’s ok if you’re not there for tryouts, but what kind of...equipment do you need?”

“It’ll be easier to show you when we meet up after tryouts,” Toby stepped forward and held out a hand “How about it Jimbo? Is it cool if I borrow your...bag for a bit?”

Jim's expression was pensive, but he slipped the messenger bag off his shoulder and held it out "Uh...ok,"

"Thanks!" Toby snagged the bag and raced away down the hall "Catch you guys later!" he flashed them a wave with his free hand, leaving behind four nervous and uncertain faces as he rushed through the hall.

Darci followed behind the others, Jim in the lead, as they headed up the steps towards his house.

"Remember to cover your eyes," Jim said with a forced chuckle "Toby might have a power sander in there,"

Darci opted to keep quiet at that, mainly because she had no idea if Jim was joking or not.

Jim cracked the door and peeked inside "Hey Tobes? You doing ok in here?"

"Come in guys! I think I've figured out something important," Toby sounded super excited, and mercifully Darci didn't hear a power sander.

They filed into the living room to see Toby kneeling in front of the coffee table with the pocket watch and what looked like a random collection of rocks, nails, and screws sitting in front of him "You guys remember Moh's scale of hardness?"

“A little bit...” Claire said slowly.

“It’s the geological scale by which the hardness of minerals is measured on a scale of one to ten. Chalk is one, diamond is ten, and a human fingernail is two and a half,”

Toby snapped his head up, green eyes flashing, a near manic grin on his face “This thing is harder than all of them,”

Darci blinked down at him “What?”

“I tested both the metal casing and the gemstone face, not even the diamond could scratch them,”

“Hang on, did you say diamond?” Mary stepped closer, eyeing the items on the table hungrily.

“An industrial diamond, that I have to put back in Ms. Lancaster’s room before she notices it’s gone,”

Claire slowly approached, kneeling down next to Toby and looking at the pocket watch with piqued interest “Harder than diamond? That... shouldn’t be possible,”

“I know!” Toby threw his hands up in the air “I thought that maybe Ms. Lancaster got ripped off, but I tested her diamond against the rest of the stuff in her kit and my own diamond, it’s the real deal,”

“Back up,” Mary sank to her knees and shoved herself in between them “ *You* have a diamond!?”

“An industrial diamond!”

Darci and Jim were the only two still hanging back, they shared a look and then Jim took half a step closer to her “I’m going to run up to my room to change, be back in a bit,”

“Got it, I’ll keep an eye on this,” she gestured to the three clustered around the coffee table.

Jim nodded headed up the stairs, leaving Darci to watch Toby, Mary, and Claire buzzing over the pocket watch.

“Shouldn’t it be impossible for anything to be harder than diamond?” Claire said slowly, turning the pocket watch over in her hands.

“Technically there is lonsdaleite, but that’s only really found in microscopic quantities inside meteorites, so I doubt that’s what this is. Not to mention both the metal casing and the gemstone face are clearly made of different materials. There’s a chance the face is lonsdaleite and the metal is some kind of superhard synthetic, but I’ve never heard of anything like that being manufactured,” he lifted his head to peek over at Mary sitting next to him “Unless...”

“No, my research hasn’t uncovered anything,” Mary said with a growl, glancing back and forth between her phone and the pocket watch.

Keeping the three in her line of sight, Darci quietly took a seat on the couch across from them. She debated weighing in before deciding

against it. If there was something to uncover the three of them would find it.

“A reverse image search turned up absolutely nothing, I couldn’t even find anything on the writing, not even what language it’s in!”

Soft footsteps sounded behind her, Darci turned to see Jim slipping on an extra large hoodie as he descended the stairs. The two of them shared a glance as he reached the main floor, his gaze flickering to the others before he headed back towards the kitchen.

“I swear it’s like this thing just fell out of the sky!”

Toby’s eyes went huge “Do you think it could be...extraterrestrial?”

“How would we even test for that,” Claire muttered, holding the watch right up to her eye.

“That’s a question for tomorrow,” Jim stepped back into the room holding two large bowls, one full of chips the other full of aluminum cans “It’s been a long thirty six hours and I need a break from whatever that thing is,”

He set the bowls on the coffee table and plucked the watch out of Claire’s hand, striding over to the desk in the corner of the room, dropping it inside the drawer and shutting it firmly before moving back to plunk down on the couch next to Darci “Let’s just have a normal afternoon with homework and videogames and tomorrow we can go back to talking about magic and diamonds and all that,”

“Fine,” Toby said, sliding the rocks and nails back into their case “I’ll

pack up the Mohs kit for tonight, Mary no pocketing my diamond,”

“Hey I’ve seen it, you can keep that ugly thing,”

They all settled in on the chairs and couches, Jim pulling the bowl of cans onto his lap while Mary grabbed the chips, Claire pulling out a binder from her backpack.

“You guys have any ideas of what to do for your book reports yet?”

Mary snorted “C-bomb that isn’t due for a month,”

“Yeah I’m not planning on thinking about that until three days before it’s due,” Toby added.

“Hey my top priority is getting a lead role in the play, and that means getting everything else out of the wa—”

An ear splitting crunch bleeding into a metallic clang shot through the room, cutting her off.

They all whipped around to see Jim sitting on the couch with a deeply uncomfortable expression on his face, the pocket watch in his hand and under his teeth.

He pried open his mouth with a wince, the pocket watch dropping down into his lap with a soft thud.

“Oww...” the sound escaped Jim as a whisper, nearly a whine.

For a moment no one spoke, Darci whipping her head back and forth between the pocket watch and the desk Jim had put it in.

“Hang on,” Toby slid closer to Jim “Did you just try to *eat* that thing?”

“I wasn’t *trying* to eat it,” Jim mumbled, rubbing his jaw, I thought it was more recycling,”

“...dude how hard are your teeth?”

Darci slowly stood off the couch “I thought you put that thing in the desk...” she made her way to the desk and opened it, finding the drawer empty.

“I...did...” Jim said, eyes going wide “None of you moved it right?”

“None of us touched that thing,” Mary said flatly.

“We all would have seen it if one of us did,” Claire added.

“Did...did this thing *teleport* ?” Jim moved to stand up but was halted by Toby’s hands on his shoulders.

“First things first, let me check and make sure none of your teeth are cracked.

Jim rolled his eyes “Tobes–”

“As someone who’s been in orthodontic hell since 7th grade trust me on this, if you have a cracked tooth you’re gonna want to know,”

Jim huffed but opened his mouth wide, allowing Toby to reach inside and start probing at his teeth.

Darci had a brief flash of a book she’d read as a kid about a mouse crawling inside a fox’s mouth to give him dental work before shaking her head and bringing her focus back around to the object in front of them.

“So exactly what made this thing...teleport?” she said slowly. Saying it out loud felt ridiculous, but they’d seen stranger things happen.

“Let’s test it,” Claire stood from the couch “Jim can I–”

“Here,” he held out the pocket watch, Claire plucking it from his grip.

Shifting her gaze from Jim to the watch, Claire took several steps back. Continuing to retreat down the hall until she was out of sight.

“It’s...not doing anything,” she called out before walking back into the room and setting the pocket watch down on the coffee table.

“Come to think of it TP had it all afternoon,” Mary glanced over at

Toby.

“Yeah,” he replied “I was running tests on it for hours and it didn’t move once,”

Jim leaned forward “So then why now did it...”

“Maybe it only teleports for you,”

All eyes in the room swiveled towards Darci, who squirmed under the scrutiny but continued “I mean...it stayed in place for Claire and Toby, but moved out of the desk when you put it in there. And you said you didn’t remember putting it in your bag this morning, so maybe...”

“Maybe...” Jim nodded slowly, picking up the watch to turn it over a few times before setting it back down “Let’s test it out,”

He stood from the couch and backed away out of the room.

The instant he was out of sight the watch *popped* out of sight in a blue flash, making all four of them jump.

Within seconds Jim stepped back into the room, eyes wide and face blank and pocket watch clutched in his hand.

“You guys see that too?”

“Yep,” Toby said with a pop, drumming his palms against his knees with barely concealed anxiety “We just saw that thing vanish out of existence, unless I’m hallucinating and you guys are just going along with it,”

“Nope, unless we’re all experiencing a mass hallucination that definitely just happened,” Darci said, eyeing the pocket watch uneasily.

Claire stood and moved towards Jim, Mary right on her heels “Did it actually move towards you or did it, like, appear and disappear?”

“Appear and disappear...I think,” Jim stared down at the watch while turning it over in his hand “I didn’t see it moving, just one second my pocket was empty and the next this thing was in there,”

“Sounds like it doesn’t move through space, but teleports directly to you,”

Toby hopped off the couch and ran to join them, pulling Jim’s arm down to stare at the object. Not wanting to be left alone in the Darci stood and walked over as well.

“But does it dematerialize and rematerialize?” Toby leaned in until the pocket watch was only inches away from his face “Or does it move through some other plane of existence where distance and physical barriers don’t matter?”

A tiny smile formed on Claire’s face “I’ve got a few ideas on how to find out,”

“Alright Darci give me your best shot!”

She grinned, making a show of winding up her arm “Heeeeeey batter batter batter, can’t hit can’t hit can’t hit– *swing!* ”

She threw the watch at Jim with her best overhand. Jim striking it in midair with a perfectly timed swing of the bat, the watch whizzing over her head and into the trees, zooming through the air out of sight.

“There’s the hit...” Jim stepped back, allowing Mary to move in front of him, catcher’s mitt at the ready “It’s going, going...” he reached out to gently grasp Mary’s elbow, moving her mitt up ever so slightly to cover her face. In the distance through the woods Darci heard a whistling sound getting steadily louder.

The pocket watch shot out of the trees and straight towards Mary, landing hard in the mitt making her grunt and stagger back, but still with a triumphant grin on her face.

Darci threw both arms in the air with a cheer “Homerun!”

“If you guys don’t stop butchering baseball lingo I’m going to have to come over there,”

The three of them looked back towards where Toby and Claire were setting up their supplies on the ground of the backyard.

Mary scoffed “C’mon TP we all know you just want another turn being catcher,” she waved the mitt and the watch in his direction.

“Hey two things can be true,”

“Actually I think we’re all set,” Claire stood and dusted her hands off
“You ready?”

“Sure,” Jim plucked the watch out of Mary’s glove and approached. He kneeled down on the ground in front of the supplies, the rest of them gathering in to watch “So where should I start...”

Claire swiftly snagged a canvas bag off the ground and held it out towards him “First pack it in this bag with the moly,”

Jim obediently dropped the watch in the bag, dried plants crinkling as he did, and tied it shut.

“Now put it in this steel lockbox,” Toby held the box in question out towards Jim. Jim gently setting the bag inside and clicking the lock shut.

“Now we bind the box with chains of iron and silver,” Claire handed him a length of chain and some silver jewelry, Jim dutifully winding them around the box.

“And this rosary,”

“And these iron beads,”

“And this Saint Michael Medallion,”

But the time Jim was done the lockbox was barely visible under all the layers of chains and beads.

Toby stood “Now put the whole thing in the oak chest,” he gestured towards the wide open wooden chest with a flourish, Jim gently setting the box down inside with Claire shutting the lid after.

For a moment they all stood around watching the chest, waiting for something to happen.

Toby shifted from foot to foot “So did it...”

“Nope,” Jim reached into his hoodie and pulled out the watch
“Showed up in my pocket in two seconds,”

“Well that settles it,” Darci stepped up and patted the top of the chest
“When someone takes that thing away it stays away, but when Jim leaves it somewhere there is absolutely nothing that can stop it from flying or teleporting back to him,”

“Still curious about possible interdimensional travel...” Toby muttered, tapping his chin thoughtfully, only to have Claire nudge him out of his thoughts.

“Hey don’t mean to rush, but can you get my moly out?”

“Oh sure let me just grab the key...” Toby reached into his front

pocket only to instantly go stiff. He quickly started going through all his other pockets before slowly turning towards Claire, face red “Ok don’t be mad...”

“You lost the key!?”

“Hey I have it...somewhere, and I’ve got a spare...I think, look I haven’t used that lockbox since I was ten!”

“Do you *know* how much moly costs?!”

“Ok ok ok,” Toby held up his hands placatingly “You can take the box home with you and I’ll give you the key when I find it, or I’ll find a guy who can pick locks, whichever comes first,”

Claire didn’t say anything, but narrowed her gaze at him as she kneeled down and lifted the lid of the trunk.

Or she would have if the lid of the trunk hadn’t stayed where it was with a soft thud of opposition.

Mary arched an eyebrow “Claire uh...did you lock the trunk?”

Claire’s face went blank “I uh...didn’t know it locked,”

“ *What!?* Nana’s jewelry is still in there!”

“How was I supposed to know it locked!”

“It is your trunk...” Mary mumbled.

“I told her we were just borrowing it for some rocks and minerals homework, what am I gonna say when she wants it back!?”

“Ok guys,” Jim stepped forward and eased himself between Claire and Toby “Let’s just chill for a second. Your stuff isn’t going anywhere,” he gestured down at the chest “You guys can take a few days to look for the keys, and if you get desperate enough I’m pretty sure I can get in there with brute force,”

Both Toby and Claire huffed a bit but calmed down.

Darci cleared her throat “Well hey, we learned a lot,”

“Yeah we learned to always keep track of your keys, and that this thing can teleport back to Jim,” Mary cut in “But we still don’t know what it is or where it came from and have no idea how to find out!”

“Actually...” Jim said slowly “I think I have an idea for where we can learn more...”

He shook his head “But not right now,” he tossed the watch in Darci’s direction, her reflexively catching it.

“Right now I just want to play catch with this thing until we pass out from exhaustion, or the mothership comes back for it, whichever happens first,”

“We can make that happen,” Toby plucked the catcher's mitt from Mary's grip while Claire grabbed the bat, all of them getting into position.

Chapter End Notes

Shout out to violetwitch820 who gave me the idea for Jim accidentally crunching the amulet.

And I fully acknowledge that I opened this door by bringing this up so I'll go ahead and share my thoughts. My headcanon is that using the amulet to don the daylight armor slows the wearer's metabolism. Which is one of the things that helped Jim survive in the darklands as he was able to get by on fewer calories. While this doesn't eliminate the urge to go to the bathroom it basically makes it so it's not a problem. So Jim was able to stay in the armor for two days with no issue, but when the armor finally came off he really had to go.

It should be obvious by this point but I love writing these five having dumb teenage fun, playing baseball with centuries old mystical artifacts. They're just kids let them be young and have fun!

Moly is the herb mentioned in the Odyssey that Odysseus used to counteract the power of the sorceress Circe, why does Claire have this on hand along with iron chains, rosary, and Saint Michael medallion? Easy, she's a teenage goth in Catholic family. Plus she canonically has a skull in her locker so I felt like moly wasn't stretching things too far. I also feel like Claire was relegated to being the "Smart" one and Toby the "Dumb" one too often in canon. Let Toby have his time to shine with his geology knowledge and let Claire be a little dumb and accidentally lock valuable items inside a trunk.

Coming June 24: The worlds of the surface and subterranean of Arcadia collide.

Chapter 4: Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“You kids sure you’ll be ok?”

Jim waved her off as the others shuffled out of the car “It’ll be fine, we’ll stay close to the canal and I’ll text you every hour,”

Barbara’s worried expression didn’t ease, but she turned back and straightened up in the driver’s seat “Ok, I trust you. Let me know if you find anything and I’ll see you in a few hours,”

Jim pulled his hood up over his horns, nodding with a confidence he didn’t quite feel but knew his mom needed to see “Alright, see you then,”

She gave him a single nod in return before pulling away back down the access road, turning a corner and being swallowed up by trees, the glint of the headlights the only thing visible in the evening gloom.

Turning away, Jim walked to the edge of the canal and slid to the bottom, where the rest of them were already waiting. The sun had set just over twenty minutes ago, the light was dim and fading fast, but the streetlights lining the canal provided just enough light to see each other and their surroundings, at least for now.

“Ok guys how should we do this? Stay together or split up to cover more ground?”

Darci rolled her eyes “Uh, stay together, obviously, I’m not getting ax murdered,”

“Sounds good, but I’m pretty sure I can take some redneck with an ax,”

Mary snickered “Oh we’re gonna hold you to that,”

They all shared a soft chuckle. Claire was the first one to stop, glancing over his shoulder, smile dropping off and gaze turning contemplative as she stared down the canal “We’re at the north intersection now, let’s head south. If we don’t find anything we can start here again tomorrow heading north,”

“Sounds like a plan,” Toby jogged ahead and took point as the five of them started walking down the concrete corridor “Let’s spread out and walk in a line, cover as much ground as possible, but stay close for aforementioned ax-murderer related reasons,”

Jim forced a smile at that as they headed down the canal, scanning the concrete as they went, but the expression didn’t sit well on his face. All things considered they were off to a good start; traffic was low, no issues getting here. Everyone was in a good mood cracking jokes and ribbing each other like usual. But none of it did anything to dispel the tightness he felt deep in his gut.

It had been five days since he’d found the not-pocket watch, and they were no closer to any real answers. The best lead they had was Eli’s claims of monsters with stone for skin fighting right where Jim had found the watch a few short hours later. Hence the five of them spending their Friday night scouring the canal for clues.

But did Eli really see what he claimed he did? Were there really others

out there like Jim? How did the watch play into things?

None of them knew, but if there were any answers in the canal they'd find them.

Jim didn't know what was stressing him out more, the thought that they wouldn't find any answers here, or that they might actually find *something* –

A car rumbled along the road above them, startling Jim out of his thoughts. He suppressed a shudder and pulled his hood down further over his face. He was used to his blue nocturnal form, and frequent camping trips kept him from becoming completely neurotic, but being outside so close to a city at night felt...weird.

The usual smells and sounds were here, trees and dirt, birds and insects; but they were buried underneath a cacophony of other senses. The roar of traffic, the stink of diesel and pollution. The contrast was jarring and had been riling him up ever since he got out of the ca-

Jim stopped dead in his tracks, head snapping around to stare into the trees above them.

“What’s up Jimbo?”

“I– I don’t know, I think I...smell something,”

Claire stepped up to his side “Smell what?”

“I’m...not sure, it’s familiar but like, it doesn’t...belong here,”

“Well then let’s check it out,” Mary propped a single sneaker on the angled side of the canal, glancing over her shoulder at the rest of them “This is why we came out here right? To investigate things, so let’s get investigating,”

“Yeah, let’s do it,” Claire started scaling the canal right behind her, Darci and Toby following on her heels.

Toby paused and looked back “Everything ok Jimbo?”

“Oh! Yeah– I’m coming,”

Soon the five of them were standing at the edge of the woods alongside the canal. Jim shut his eyes and pulled in a deep breath through his nose “Whatever it is, it’s close,”

“Lead the way then,” Claire sided up next to him “We’re following your super senses,”

“R– right,”

Jim forced himself to pick up his feet and follow the strange scent into the woods, keenly aware of the four smaller sets of footsteps trailing him. Trading the open glow of streetlights on cement to the deep gloom of the woods, unease deepening in his gut with every step.

He’d been on edge ever since they got here, but for some reason this

new smell was putting his anxiety into overdrive. He had no idea why, it wasn't a bad smell, in fact it was familiar in a way he just couldn't put his finger on, but with something else clinging to it. The combination tripping alarm bells in his head.

They needed to push ahead, this was the best lead they'd found and as nervous as he was his drive for answers was still stronger than his unease.

Reflexively Jim pulled his hood down even further, fabric hanging down directly in his fa-

He stopped dead in his tracks, making the others stumble to a halt behind him.

Darci stepped around him "Everything ok?"

"Guys I think I might know what this is, it smells kind of like...me,"

"That's great!" she beamed up at him "If there's someone else like you out there we can ask them for answers,"

"Sure...yeah,"

"Well what are we waiting for!" Toby eagerly rushed ahead "Let's go! We've got a fellow were-gargoyle to meet!"

The others all sped up, Jim had to fight from breaking into a run as he lengthened his strides to take the lead. Some murky, innate need in

the back of his head demanding that he place himself between his friends and the strange scent as they headed deeper into the trees. Ice prickling up his spine, fur on his neck and back standing on end.

His sense of smell was sharper when he was blue but not so sharp that he could identify people by scent alone. In general people all smelled more or less the same. The way he could tell them apart is by what other scents accompanied them.

Mom smelled like person plus disinfectant.

Toby smelled like person plus cat.

Claire smelled like person plus gardenia shampoo.

By the same note the scent he was following was the same as the scent that clung to Jim's clothes and bedsheets, but with a heavy, almost sweet note to it that Jim's own scent was missing. Raising his hackles and sending adrenaline shooting through him for reasons he couldn't understand—

A rattling sound was the only warning he got before the watch flew out of his pocket, slamming into his chest with the armor materializing in a bright flash.

The others all started, but Jim just shook his head "Forget it, let's just keep going,"

They had to be in the open space by now, the only light came from the glow of his armor and civilization might as well be miles away. The strange scent was almost overpowering now, leading him to a gap

in the trees–

He stopped dead in his tracks, every speck of air knocked from his lungs. Jim was vaguely aware of the others stumbling into him from behind, letting out their own gasps of shock, but all that seemed distant and unimportant compared to what laid directly ahead of him.

Less than twelve feet ahead of them, sitting in a large clearing, there was a creature made of black stone, just like Jim was made of blue, but that was where the similarities ended. This creature was massive, easily eight feet tall, maybe more. Broad and bulky with muscles so well defined they looked carved.

And for all Jim knew they very well might have been.

In place of any kind of normal clothing this creature wore a leather kilt, straps across their chest. A mane of shaggy, black hair ran down the creature's back–

From out of nowhere the creature whirled on them, piercing the five of them with searingly red eyes, the only trace of color on its body. Jagged tusks poked out of the creature's mouth, dark horns curling down on either side of its– his? Face. His gaze glowing through the trees.

For a moment no one moved. The six of them all appraising each other.

Toby shifted from foot to foot, giving a little wave “Uh...hello? How's it going?”

The creature's mouth pulled into a wide grin, exposing a mouthful of large, crooked teeth accompanying his tusks. Rising to his full height, level with the smaller trees, taking easy strides towards them.

"Finally, my search is at an end," the creature's voice was low and gravely, easily carrying across the clearing.

Jim flinched at being addressed "Wha—"

A metallic shing echoed through the clearing as the creature reached above his back, metal glinting as he pulled something free "You have two choices Trollhunter. Surrender the amulet and I will allow you the honor of watching Gunmar rise to his full glory. Refuse me and perish,"

Jim blinked, and the object came into focus. It was a sword, pointed directly at the five of them.

The ringing alarm bells in his head started screaming.

It was at this moment that Jim realized the mysterious note clinging to this creature's scent.

Rotting meat.

"Run,"

"Wha—"

“ *Guys run!* ”

The creature lunged towards them with a roar, the five of the shrieking and scrambling out of the way. All of Jim's senses were working in overdrive. He could hear every twig snapping, see every twitch of a limb, as the red eyed creature charged.

In that moment Jim forgot about the watch, his blue form, where he was and what he was doing. Everything. The only thing he knew was that if he didn't get away they were all going to *die* –

Jim leapt to the side, snagging Mary and Claire under his arm and out of the creature's path the second before his blade came down. Leaping back again and grabbing Toby and Darci with his other arm. Heartbeat booming in his ears, Jim forced himself to turn his back on the creature as he pivoted around and started sprinting as fast as he could, not even paying attention to which way he was going in his desperate goal to get *away* –

The creature roared behind him, further away now but still far too close. Branches snapping and cracking as he pursued them. Spurring Jim to push his legs even faster.

Jim didn't think he just *ran* . Racing through the trees with all his might, ducking and dodging past trees at the last second, keeping a tight grip on the others, near manic in his desperation to create distance between them and the creature.

His panicked energy seemed boundless, the weight of the others in his arms barely registered. Jim could run with them all the way to Nevada if he had to. But while their weight barely registered four people was a lot to carry, arms and legs flopping all over the place.

And he could only hold them so tight without hurting them, and as he continued to run he could feel someone start to slip.

Even though everything in him was screaming to keep going, Jim forced his legs to stagger to a stop and released them. The four tumbling free and wobbling on their feet.

Toby panted, shooting a frantic look back through the trees “What the actual *fuck* was that thing!?”

“I...I don’t know,” Claire turned towards Jim “Do you...?”

“No I have *absolutely* no clue what that thing was,”

“Well whatever it was, we need to—”

“Greetings!”

Jim’s heart shot up into his throat, rushing forward and planting himself in front of the others as the four of them screamed and staggered back.

Another creature stepped through the trees towards them. This one was smaller, but somehow even less human. Head was larger, too many eyes, too many arms. Blue instead of black, suspenders instead of a kilt. Scent of paper and dust clinging to him as opposed to decaying meat.

The creature’s eyes landed on Jim, who couldn’t help but flinch, their

mouth breaking into a wide grin “Alas we’ve found you!
AAARRRGHH come hither!”

Heavy footsteps thudded through the forest ahead. Jim whipped his head up to see another creature pushing through the trees, his already hammering heartbeat skyrocketing.

This one was huge, just as big as the first creature they saw, maybe bigger. Lurching through the trees on all fours, making Jim think of a gorilla. No clothes, just a shaggy green mane over a gray stony body.

Somehow Jim still managed to hear the others shriek and stagger back over the roaring in his ears. Jim took a step back, arms spread wide and twitching, getting ready to tuck the others back under his arms and book it the second they had a chance.

But before he could move the many eyed creature’s expression turned to concern, holding up four hands.

“Oh there’s no need to panic, me and my companion mean you no harm,”

“Yeah right,” Mary spat.

“It true,” the big creature rumbled out “Us friends,”

“Yes you can count us among your allies Trollhunter,”

It took Jim a second to register the word many eyes used.

“Sorry, what was that?”

Many-eyes’ smile got even wider “We have been searching for you for quite some time Trollhunter,” he raised a finger to point at Jim–

No, not at Jim, at the amulet embedded in his chest.

Jim’s brain was still playing catch up “Wait wait wait, you’re saying I’m a....Troll Hunter?”

Many-eyes blinked, all six of his eyes, before letting out a sharp laugh “Quite a sense of humor on yo–”

A roar sounded in the distance, but far too close for comfort, causing all of them, including the newcomers, to jump.

“Leave now, explain later,” the big one rumbled.

“Right you are AAARRRGHH. Come young Trollhunter, we can provide shelter for you and your companions,”

“Ummm...question,” Toby piped up, voice a full octave higher than normal “How do we know that you aren’t just luring us into a false sense of security to take us to your lair to eat us later?”

“Have no fear, my companion and I have taken oaths to never partake in human flesh,”

“Yeah, not good eno—”

Another roar, far too close now.

“We really gotta pick and choose here guys,” Darci said shrilly, bouncing from foot to foot and glancing through the trees anxiously.

Jim forced back his jitters and turned towards many-eyes “This place you’re talking about, it’ll be safe, from...him?”

Many eyes nodded “You have my word that you and your companions will be protected from all harm,”

“Ok, take us there,”

“Quickly then, right this way,”

Many eyes and big guy led the five of them through the woods. Jim had lost all sense of direction by this point, but soon enough they broke through the trees back at the canal, scrambling down the side, the two strangers heading towards the main bridge.

“ *This* is the safe place you were talking about!?” Claire said incredulously.

“Not quite, this is but the *gateway* to our sanctu—”

A whooshing sound in his ear and rush of air was all the warning Jim got before something rammed into his side, sending him flying through the air to slam into the side of the canal.

His head was spinning, a low wheeze escaping his chest, Jim somehow managed to determine which direction was upright and push himself up. He blinked to clear his vision only to have the breath freeze in his chest.

The large red eyed creature stood in the bottom of the canal, stalking towards him with a sword in each hand. Behind him Jim could see his friends standing back near the bridge, looking at him wide eyed and terrified.

Head still spinning, he put his feet underneath him and forced himself to stand. Spotting cracks in the concrete underneath him, Jim put several things together at once.

This big creature had punched him with enough force to crack concrete. But Jim wasn't hurt, not really. Due to his stone skin or the armor or maybe a bit of both Jim had just gotten the wind knocked out of him.

But such a move would kill one of his fleshy, unarmored friends in an instant.

His vision was still swimming and his heart hammering so loud he wouldn't be surprised if red eyes could hear it, but in that moment Jim made an ironclad decision.

Even though every instinct in his body was screaming at him to run, Jim reached back and pulled the sword off his back.

“Guys *go!* ” he waved at them with his free arm “Get somewhere safe while I hold him off,”

He could hear them screaming even as his field of vision became filled by red eyes charging towards him, glowing gaze locked on Jim. He didn’t care about the others, he was completely focused on Jim. Good. He could distract him while they got to the safe place.

Those thoughts kept his feet rooted to the ground, but didn't do anything to abate the gut curdling terror sweeping through him as the creature swung a blade down towards him.

Jim swung his own sword up, blade meeting blade with a deafening clang, but not so loud he couldn’t hear the others.

“ *Jim!* ”

“Quickly into the doorway–”

“We can’t just leave him!”

“He’ll stand a better chance without you now go–”

For a moment a trill of relief filled him, then red eyes leaned forward, pushing his blade down and forcing Jim back, fanged mouth pulled into a savage grin, and every drop of relief vanished.

Quick as a flash, red eyes pulled his blade away and brought the other one down, forcing Jim to sloppily parry. His entire focus swallowed up by deflecting the larger creature's blows.

Jim didn't know anything about sword fighting, but he knew a bit about knives, and had experience handling several kinds. He was no Michelin chef, but he liked to think his skill was a bit above average. A sword wasn't a chef's knife, but applying what he knew about blades Jim managed to keep a decent hold on his sword, using his practiced speed and efficiency to deflect red eyes' strikes.

Jim was blocking every single blow, but despite this a deepening sense of dread pooled in his gut.

He was blocking the creature's blows, but only barely. Red eyes was bigger than him with a much longer reach, and a lot stronger to, and Jim felt every blocked blow stinging in his joints. Without even realizing it he'd taken several steps back in a futile attempt to lessen the impacts. It was only a matter of time before he was pinned between the red eyes and the side of the canal.

And Jim was no swordsman, but something about red eyes' movements seemed...sloppy. Almost lazy in the way he was battering at Jim with his swords, eyes gleaming over a toothy grin.

Jim was giving his all and barely able to keep his footing, but red eyes was just playing with him.

Frantic, Jim jumped back at an angle, to try and get more open space at his back and avoid being pinned. He was successful but opened himself up for a backhanded blow from red eyes, sending him sailing down the canal, armor screeching against the concrete as he slid to a stop.

He scrambled back upright, panicked and dizzy. Sloppy as it had been he had been successful at building space between him and red eyes. But now he had to scramble out of the way as he rushed towards him with startling speed.

“Over here! This way!” Jim snapped his head around, spotting many eyes standing under the bridge near the canal wall, only now there was a glowing portal in the side of the canal leading to subterranean spaces unknown.

Jim didn’t question where it led or even how such a thing was possible. He just *ran* . Sprinting towards the portal with all his might, knowing that his only chance of survival was under the bridge.

His feet slammed into the concrete again and again, maybe even hard enough to crack it. Not that Jim slowed down to check, not even daring to look back at the thuds of red eyes in hot pursuit, roaring far too close for comfort.

The gateway was getting closer, but so was his pursuer. And Jim didn’t know who was going to reach their goal first.

Almost there almost there almost there –

Jim leapt through the portal, yellow streetlights giving way to a cool blue. The change in scenery barely registered, Jim keeping up his breakneck speed as he raced through the space. Rushing ahead even as the ground underneath him turned into a large set of steps. Big guy and many-eyes’ shouts from behind him drowned out by the roaring in his ears as he scrambled deeper and deeper into the earth.

Eventually he stumbled off the last stair, the shock making him stagger and slow down for the first time. Jim leaned against the rock wall at his side, panting, frantically looking around for a trace of his fr-

Jim froze.

A wide space opened up in front of him, easily the size of at least two football fields, maybe three, maybe more. Various buildings and structures carved out of bedrock filled the massive cavern, but all that he noticed second.

Dozens of creatures milled around; black, blue, green, red- every shade of the rainbow. Some with two eyes, some with five, some with just one. Horns of all shapes and sizes. Kilts and trousers and suspenders and more than a few forgoing all clothes. Some of the creatures were Jim's size, some of them were nearly as large as many eyes' friend. But all of them were the same in that they were made of stone.

Just like the red eyed creature.

Just like many-eyes and big guy.

Just like *Jim*-

One creature, red skin with a unicorn-like horn above a single large eye did a double take as their cyclopean gaze rolled over Jim, stopping in mid stride to turn and stare at Jim fully. Jim wincing back at the scrutiny.

Cyclop's jaw dropped open, his single eye widening “ *The Trollhunter is here!* ” they bellowed.

Just like that every creature stopped what they were doing and turned. Every eye in the cavern now on Jim.

The crowd surged towards him, Jim shrinking back as the creatures approached en masse. All of them were shouting, speaking over each other to the extent Jim couldn't pick out what they were saying, but there was one word he heard repeated again and again.

The same word both red eyes and many eyes had used.

“–Trollhunter!”

“ *Trollhunter!?* ”

“Trollhunter–”

Jim could barely breathe, the tightness in his chest choking him. Creatures– people? So many of them. Staring at him, surrounding him, the crush of bodies nearly suffocating. His heartbeat and breathing picking up faster and faster. He needed more air than his body could give him. So many people looking at him, *seeing* him. Creatures just like *him* –

It was too all much. Adrenaline surging Jim broke free and ran. Shoving stony bodies out of his way heedless of shouts and squawked protests. *Finally* breaking free of the crowd and racing deeper into the cavern. Desperate to get away from *here* –

But no matter how fast he ran he couldn't escape the cries of 'Trollhunter' chasing after him, ringing in his ears long after he'd left the crowd behind.

Chapter End Notes

Alternate title: Jim learns about instincts and the dangers of ignoring them

The event horizon's officially been crossed, the worlds of human and troll have collided and there's no going back. And next time we'll get our first official (happening on the run from Bular doesn't count) meeting between Jim and Blinky.

I'm going to be out of town and away from internet for a week, so the next update will be a bit delayed. But I should be able to get it up on either July 23 or July 24.

Chapter 5: Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

The developmental stages of humans and trolls don't exactly line up one to one, something I'll get into later. All you need to know right now is that for the most part whelps = kids and striplings = teenagers, and adult trolls will occasionally refer to striplings as whelps the same way people will call teenagers "kids".

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Over his many years in Trollmarket, and even Dwoza before that, Blinky had inadvertently found himself at the root of several market-wide disturbances. Usually as a result of his attempts to root out conspiracies. While Blinky considered a temporary chaos a necessary sacrifice in rooting out hated conspiracies from their market, others did not share this view, namely Vendel...among others.

But while today's events hadn't been the result of one of Blinky's attempts to uproot a conspiracy, the fact remained that this had the potential to be the largest catastrophe attached to his name yet.

Blinky cautiously peeked outside the stairway entrance, the cacophony of noise having greeted him halfway up the stairs, dreading what he might see.

Dozens of trolls rushed about, nervous chatter passing back and forth in voices ranging from hushed to booming. The word Trollhunter repeating again and again, underneath that was the occasional muttered 'fleshbag'. Both the young Trollhunter and wayward humans had been lost somewhere in the crush of the crowd and the maze of buildings. The absence of their new Trollhunter and a lack of new information was making the crowd's energy rise to a fever pitch. It would surely boil over unless someone stepped in and calmed them down.

And unfortunately it looked as though that someone was him.

Blinky climbed to the top of a large boulder, clearing his throat in preparation of raising his voice “Friends friends settle down! No need for a panic,”

Not every eye in the crowd turned towards him, but enough of them did that Blinky had to stop himself from squirming under their gaze.

“The new Trollhunter’s been chosen!” a voice called out from the back of the crowd “I saw them! They were here and then they ran off!”

Folding his two left arms behind his back Blinky used a right to point at the shouter “Right you are. The new Trollhunter is here, AAARRRGHH and I escorted them to our fair market and their training will start post haste. So no cause for an uproar. You may all go about your bus–”

“They can’t be the new Trollhunter!” a new voice closer to the front cut in “They’re too damn young! Practically still a whelp!”

“Well you see–”

“And what about the fleshbags!? How’d they get in here?”

“Ah that’s an easy explanation, our new Trollhunter was protecting them from Bular–”

The second the Gumm Gumm prince’s name left his mouth a spike of

alarm shot through the crowd, murmurings turning to panicked shouts and roars.

Blinky froze, one hand still perched in midair.

Oh dear....

“But never fear! Bular was halted by the wards! There’s no danger here—”

His voice was lost in the din of the crowd, the trolls before him working themselves up into a frenzy, threatening to—

“ What is the meaning of this! ”

In an instant every troll present in the square fell silent, Blinky included, swiveling towards the new voice. The crowd parting like all of the sea as Trollmarket’s elder made his way through.

“What sort of calamity justifies this ruckus?”

Both sets of hands netted behind Blinky’s back as he grinned down sheepishly at the approaching Vendel.

“Ah well it’s quite simple really, AAARRRRGGHH and I found the new Trollhunter on the surface. They were in the process of rescuing a group of humans from Bular. Me and my mountainous companion then guided them to the safety of Trollmarket where...where... ummm...”

“Where you lost them,” Vendel said flatly “And unleashed a group of panicked humans upon our peaceful market,”

Blinky forced his grin so wide it hurt.

Vendel let out a low groan and kneaded the skin between his eyes with one hand, after a few moments he lifted the hand away from his face, jabbing a finger at Blinky then down directly in front of him.

Guts twisting in on themselves, Blinky got down from his perch and approached, AAARRRRGGHH joining them until the three were bunched together.

“Only you could turn a simple retrieval mission into complete pandemonium...” Vendel muttered with a shake of his head.

“But at least we found the Trollhunter!” Blinky cut in “And brought them safely here, both them and the amulet out of reach of the dark clutches of Bular,”

“Believe me I know,” Vendel raised his head to look back at him “And I am more grateful than words can say for your doing so,”

Blinky felt all six of his eyes go wide “Really!?”

Vendel flashed him a rare smile “Yes, but now that the immediate danger is past we must do damage control,”

He pointed the head of his staff at Blinky “Find where in Trollmarket our new hunter has run off to,” the staff pivoted up towards AAARRRGHH “You gather the stray humans. I will settle the crowd, we’ll meet back up at my dwell with the Trollhunter to discuss what comes next,”

Both Blinky and AAARRRGHH nodded affirmatively at this then began to move away to carry out their assigned tasks. Blinky made it a few steps then paused and turned back

“Ah! Vendel, what shall we do about...” he trailed off, the words sticking in his throat.

“About what Blinkous?”

“About...Draal,”

The mood between the three trolls shifted instantly, a shadow falling across Vendel’s face.

“We shall deal with Draal when the time comes, for now let’s focus on the problems we can control,”

With a quick nod and a heavy heart, Blinky turned away and left the others behind as he headed down to narrower, less populated corridors of Trollmarket. Scanning every alley and crevice as he went.

Now if he was a wayward Trollhunter where would he hide? He was familiar enough with the various avenues to guess at which corridors to start, but Trollmarket was vast with many hidden nooks and crannies, more than enough places for a young troll to hide.

Thankfully the commotion at the main entryway had attracted a large chunk of the market's population, leaving the rest of the market sparse, so he wouldn't have to fight through crowds while on his search.

Not to mention fewer trolls to hover over their new hunter and frazzle them more than they already were.

Reaching a crossroads, Blinky paused as he surveyed the paths ahead of him, tapping his chin thoughtfully. After a moments debate he chose his path and hurried on ahead.

It was no wonder the whelp had become overwhelmed and run off. There were full grown trolls that would quake at the responsibility of bearing the amulet of Daylight, to say nothing of how an unblooded stripling would react to such a monumental—

A blue flash in the corner of Blinky's eye stopped him in his tracks, pulling his attention to a small alley. Moving quickly, he hurried over to the narrow stone corridor, sending a quick plea to Gorgus that his search was at an end.

And perhaps Gorgus did decide to take pity on him because the Trollhunter sat just inside the alley. They were huddled on the ground holding their knees to their chest, breathing so fast and hard their whole body was quivering. Blinky fought to keep from wincing but couldn't quite keep the grimace off his face.

This troll was so so young. Tusks small and horns rounded, nary a scar or a gouge to be seen. Where had this young troll come from, let alone come across the amulet? Blinky was familiar with all the whelps and striplings in Trollmarket and this fellow wasn't any of them. The only thing he could think of was that they were part of a clan of surface dwelling nomads. But who would struggle with a whelp on the surface

when a protected market full of resources was right below their feet...

Blinky shook his head. However it happened the amulet had chosen this stripling and they were here. It wasn't within Blinky's power to lift this burden from their young shoulders, but he could provide them sanctuary and the training to grow into their calling.

He cleared his throat softly, just enough to grab their attention.

The stripling stiffened, instantly going stone still on the ground.

"Are you alright?" Blinky spoke quickly, hoping to stop the young Trollhunter from running off in a panic again "You weren't injured in your struggle with Bular were you?"

"No I—" the stripling gulped down a deep breath "I— I'm fine. That... Bular guy, is he...gone?"

"For all intents and purposes, yes. He cannot penetrate Trollmarket's wards, you, and those humans you rescued, are safe down here,"

The stripling flopped back against the wall, arms and legs tumbling limp at their sides, practically melting into the stone, a deep shuddering breath escaping their chest.

"Oh, oh good, they're...they're safe,"

The corners of Blinky's mouth twitched up into a smile. To have such care for even humans, going out of his way to rescue them from Bular

when many a troll would have let them be slaughtered rather than risk their own stone. The young troll in front of him was still very much a stranger, but Blinky knew they had a kind heart. A thing which would serve them well as Trollhunter.

“So...this place is...Trollmarket?”

In an instant the smile dropped off of Blinky’s face. The stripling’s unfamiliarity with their surroundings was...troubling. Even exiles and surface dwelling nomads were still *aware* of Trollmarket. The only reasons he could think of such a young troll being completely oblivious were...tragic ones.

Blinky shook his head and stepped into the alley.

Well whatever their background was, this whelp had a home and community now.

“Correct, Trollmarket is hearth and home to many a troll,” he extended a hand down towards the stripling “Including you,”

The stripling blinked at the offered hand before turning their gaze up towards Blinky “T- troll, right,”

After a brief moment of hesitation they gripped the offered appendage and allowed Blinky to assist in pulling them up, standing on shaky legs.

“I am known as Blinky, son of the Galadrigal clan, Trollmarket’s principal librarian and scholar. Might I have something to call you?”

“J– Jim, son of...Barbara?”

“Well then young Master Jim, I am sure you have many questions,” Blinky stepped backwards out of the alley and stretched out his two right arms “I am happy to provide you with answers. If you would be so kind as to follow me, I know where we can discuss these matters in private,”

Jim appeared startled at his words, but he nevertheless stepped out of the alley after him “That– that would be great, thanks,”

Blinky fought down another smile as he turned and began leading the new Trollhunter towards Vendel's dwell. Feeling not entirely at peace, but lighter than he had since before Kanjigar's fall.

Chapter End Notes

One dad has been acquired, more to come at a later date.

The reason Jim is able to talk so calmly with Blinky right now is because he's basically burned through all the adrenaline in his body. He's still worried about his friends (and his entire worldview being shattered) but right now he's just glad that everyone's safe and no one is actively throwing swords at his head.

When Blinky saw Jim and co on the run from Bular he just kind of assumed Bular was going after the humans, and Jim, as the Trollhunter, jumped in to save them. That's obviously the most logical explanation, why else would a young troll associate with humans...

Fun fact, trolls introducing themselves as "Son of _" or "Daughter of _" ect. is how they inform strangers of what pronouns they use. This is why Blinky used gender neutral pronouns when thinking about Jim initially. Then when Jim introduces himself as "Son of Barbara" Blinky switches to he/him. I imagine troll language at the very least has two sets of gender neutral pronouns. One for

"This troll identifies as gender neutral" and another for "I do not know this troll's gender and I don't want to assume".

So right now Blinky, AAARRRGHH, Vendel, Bular, ect. are all assuming that Jim is a normal troll (albeit much younger than the average Trollhunter). Jim now knows that trolls are a thing, but he has no idea about changelings or just how unique his shifting, half human state is. The end result is that he's going to reveal something pretty nonchalantly in the next chapter, that is going to blow several centuries old troll minds.

Coming August 19: Vendel could really use a drink right now.

Chapter 6: Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Being the elder of the largest hearthstone community on this continent came with a litany of responsibilities, some outspoken and many more tacit. One of which was keeping a cool head and level temperament even in times of crisis.

Kanjigar falling and there being no trace of a new Trollhunter for days certainly counted as a crisis.

Glancing around his workshop, Vendel confirmed that he was indeed alone before placing a hand on the wall, searching for a small, hidden compartment.

Dealing with such troubles when they arose steadily wore at his nerves, but Vendel accepted these burdens wholeheartedly. The position of a leader was never one he sought out, but time and time again he found no one else willing to fulfill the responsibilities no one else stepped up to. He was no troll's master, Vendel was simply willing to do what needed to be done.

But that didn't mean he couldn't allow himself a quick reward now that the most dire urgency had passed.

Vendel pulled a small stone box out of the cubby in the wall, opening it to reveal a dark amber bottle. Uncorking the bottle he gave the contents an appreciative sniff before taking a deep swig. Warmth blooming in his stomach as he swallowed.

A vintage from the old country, not overly strong but of the highest quality, and if there was ever a time to indulge himself with a nip it was now.

After several unbearably tense days the new Trollhunter had been discovered, and while the work had only just begun, all of Trollmarket could breathe a collective sigh of relief at the presence of their new champion and the assurance of the amulet's continuity.

Recorking the bottle, Vendel stepped over and placed it on the corner of his work table. Part of him longed to pour the contents into a flagon, spend all evening sipping and savoring the fine taste, but he couldn't allow himself such luxury just yet.

The new Trollhunter's training had to begin immediately. Vendel didn't dare to dream that they were close to Kanjigar's level of skill, but surely they couldn't be as young as some of the rumors claimed—

A soft thudding echoed in from the hall, Venedel swiftly replacing the mead in its hiding place, glancing over just in time to see AAARRRGHH lumbering into the dwell with a large *noisy* sack clutched in one hand.

"Humans," AAARRRGHH pointed his free hand at the sack, its contents shouting and squirming within the canvas "Caught,"

"Get your foot out of my face!"

"Your elbow's in my gut!"

"Hang on hang on hang on, I've got a swiss army keychain—"

In an instant the pleasant tingle from the mead evaporated “You brought the humans here!?”

AAARRRGHH blinked, glancing back and forth between Vendel and the sack with a deeply uncomfortable expression. Vendel bit back a groan.

AAARRRGHH was far from a foolish troll, indeed one did not rise to the rank of general by being a half wit, but his tendency to follow tasks he was given to the letter rather than using his own intuition to follow through often led to problems, problems that often lead Vendel to headaches.

“Well no matter, take them to the surface and–”

A loud ripping sound startled Vendel into silence, glancing over just in time to see a wide split open up in the side of the bag and four humans come tumbling out, landing on the floor in a heap of yelps and grumbles.

AAARRRGHH blinked down at them then looked up at Vendel helplessly.

Vendel pinched the stone between his eyes and grumbled a curse, muttering at AAARRRGHH in common trollish.

“Stand in front of the entrance so they can’t leave the dwell,”

Chasing after a bunch of stray humans was the last thing Vendel

wanted to do right now. They'd gather them back up once they had more hands to help them do it. For now they'd just ensure that they didn't run loose in the market.

AAARRRGHH nodded back at him before subtly shuffling to the side and blocking off the cave entrance. The humans appeared to take no notice, clamoring to their feet and starting to very noisily explore their surroundings.

"Holy shish kebabs, what is this place!?"

"Where are we...."

"It looks like some kind of underground workshop,"

"I see feldspar- holy heck is that entire wall citrine!?"

Vendel pointedly ignored the humans as they spread out throughout his dwell, biting his tongue even when they started to fiddle with his tools and thumb through his manuscripts with their grimy, fleshy fingers. Any attention he gave them would only serve to rile them up even further. The best thing to do with the humans was ignore them until-

A soft poke in his side had Vendel whipping around with a glare, sending one of the humans, stout with orange hair, hastily scurrying away from him.

Merlin give him patience, was it too much to ask to have the new Trollhunter's advent go smoothly-

“Vendel I hope you’ve prepared yourself,” Blinkous’ voice echoed in from the entrance tunnel “Our Trollhunter is here!”

AAARRRGHH stepped to the side, allowing Blinkous and a smaller figure in shining silver armor to step into the dwell.

“Allow me to introduce our new Trollhunter, Jim! Son of Bah-bu-rah,”

Vendel had hoped the claims of the Trollhunter’s youth were exaggerations, the amulet of Daylight couldn’t *truly* choose a whelp. But to his horror the Trollhunter appeared exactly as young as witnesses claimed.

He fought to keep a grimace off his face. He needed to keep his composure, if only for the sake of the trolls around him. But titans below it was obscene to see that armor wrapped around such a youngster. Soft looking stone, tusks and horns blunted, Vendel had half a mind to grab this Jim by the scruff and drag him back to his parents–

Vendel gripped his staff and pulled in a discreet breath to steady himself. What’s done was done, a Trollhunter chosen is never unchosen, as scandalous as their new hunter’s age was the only thing to do was to provide him training and–

“Guys!” Jim raced into the dwell, wide smile splitting his face, and to Vendel’s shock the humans scurried up to meet him.

“I’m so glad you’re all ok!”

“I’m glad you got away from tall dark and ugly,”

There was more chatter among the five of them, four humans and one troll, but Vendel heard none of it. Turning swiftly towards Blinkous, who’s utterly hang jawed expression told him that he was just as shocked at this development as Vendel was.

From what he’d understood the humans just happened to be in the area and ran into Bular, at which point the new Trollhunter jumped in to defend them. But seeing them interact so...so *carelessly* ...

The stout human prodded their elbow into the Trollhunter’s side, the Trollhunter barking out a laugh and swatting their shoulder. All five still smiling and relaxed.

They’d met long before this night, precisely how long ago Vendel couldn’t say, but long enough that the Trollhunter trusted them implicitly, more than any troll should ever trust a human. Vendel’s stomach started to develop a painful pinch, just what sort of upbringing had this stripling been through that would encourage them to form such inappropriate—

“ *Where are they!?* ”

Booming footsteps echoed in from the tunnel, startling the humans and young hunter into silence, Blinkous and AAARRRGHH staggering back in shock, the groan that had been building in Vendel’s throat finally escaping.

Of course, fates forbid he only have to deal with one dilemma at a time.

Draal shoved his way past Blinkous into the dwell, red eyes narrowing when they spotted the smaller troll wrapped in armor.

Jim and the humans stiffened under the scrutiny.

“So you’re the new Trollhunter...” Draal said with a growl, prowling around him.

“Uhhh.....” Jim looked down at himself and jerked his shoulders up and down “I guess?”

Draal snorted, coming up to Vendel’s side “They’re clearly too young, the amulet should be borne by a full grown troll, not a whelp like this,”

A sentiment Vendel certainly didn’t disagree with, but the fact was there simply wasn’t anything he or anyone else could do to change things.

He reached up and clapped a hand on Draal’s shoulder, forcing the younger troll to lean down and look him in the eyes “Draal, you know as well as I do that a troll chosen by the amulet is never unchosen. And while this choice might be...unconventional we must–”

“Excuse me,”

Both Vendel and Draal glanced down to see one of the humans, brown skin and dark hair with a streak of blue, approaching them.

“Hey there, so I noticed you guys toss the words ‘troll’ and ‘Trollhunter’ around a lot. I was just wondering if you could explain a bit what they mean?”

Vendel opened his mouth but Draal beat him to it.

“*We* are trolls,” Draal said with a growl “I’m a troll,” he pointed towards himself “He’s a troll,” a thumb towards Vendel “They are all trolls!” a hand thrown in the direction of Blinky, AAARRRGHH, and Jim.

“Wait...” Jim slowly pulled himself to full height, raising a hand to point inwards towards his own chest “That’s what I am? The stone skin and the horns make me a...troll?”

One of Draal’s eyes twitched.

“Correct,” he whipped an arm up and stabbed a finger in his direction “And that amulet and the armor it summons belong to the Trollhunter,”

“Ok...wow, so I’m a troll...”

“Guess you’ll have to return all your were-gargoyle business cards,” the dark skinned human said with a laugh.

“Wait, you have a Troll-hunter?” the blue haired human spoke up again “Because if you’re all trolls does that mean you hunt yourselves or—”

They were cut off by a huff and a snarl from Draal, the troll's patience clearly at an end "How much longer must these *fleshbags* remain here?"

"Hey I don't call you gravel face don't call me fleshbag..." the human with the longest hair muttered.

"Quite right," Blinkous stepped forward, holding another large sack in front of him "Alright, everyone in, we'll have you back to the surface in no time,"

None of the humans moved, eyeing the bag uneasily, Jim stepped past them, situating himself between the humans and Blinkous.

"Ok, no bags here,"

"Human feet have never sullied the stones of Trollmarket!" Draal said with a growl.

"Ok, wow, can't believe you just said that," the dark skinned human said.

"Look," Jim moved until he was standing between Draal and the humans "The five of us are a package deal here. So no more 'fleshbag' talk or throwing people into sacks,"

Draal growled while Vendel was taken aback.

The Trollhunter's behavior towards their humans, how casual they

were with each other.... He had a sinking feeling that the stripling's upbringing was more enmeshed in human society than any proper troll's should be. Perhaps this was why the amulet had called to him, to lead him away from the humans kingdoms of the surface and back underground where he belo-

"Humans have no place in our hallowed home," Draal snarled "As the one wearing that amulet you should desire to uphold the sanctity of Trollmarket more than any other,"

"But I'm human," Jim blurted out.

The eye of every troll in the dwell landed on him in an instant, strained silence filling the dwell.

"Hah!" Blinkous forced out an awkward laugh "Our new Trollhunter is a jokester, such a delightful spirit,"

"He is clearly unwell and unfit to wield the amulet!"

"Maybe humans....stay?"

Vendel buried his forehead in his hand. Gorgus help him this was going to be a long night.

"Oh right," Jim snapped his fingers "Toby do you have the-"

"On it," the stout human pulled something out of his bag and pointed it towards the Trollhunter. He gave the object a click, bathing the

Trollhunter in violet light.

Wonderful, their new Trollhunter was a whelp who'd clearly spent far too many of his formative years with humans who'd filled his head with all sorts of nonsensical ideas. Was it the world that had gone mad or just him—

There was a shift, so subtle Vendel thought he imagined it; then, slowly but surely, a change swept over the Trollhunter.

Stature shrinking, horns receding away, blue stone turning soft and pink. Vendel's mouth going dry as he watched the transformation unfold before his eyes.

Now it was not a troll but a human that stood before them, still wrapped in the shining armor of the Trollhunter, amulet of Daylight affixed to their chest.

Vendel was millennia old, he'd dealt with many challenges that left him frustrated, disgruntled, or even exhausted, but for the first time in more centuries than he could remember Vendel found himself chilled to the bone.

The human spread their arms, armor clinking as they did—

Blasphemous, heretical, to have that sacred armor worn by one who could twist themselves between stone and flesh —

And let out a small laugh “Tah dah...”

No one moved; Blinkous, AAARRRGHH, and Draal staring at the Trollhunter in frozen horror. An emotion Vendel himself was also feeling in just as great a measure, but he didn't let the terror and revulsion paralyze him as he rushed to Blinkous' side, leaning down to hiss in his ear.

“Go get a gaggletack *now!* ”

Chapter End Notes

So Vendel might come across as particularly grumpy towards the kids, but he genuinely doesn't hate humans. Vendel sees humans as a race that merely wants to grow and thrive, just as trolls do. However, as much empathy as he has for humans Vendel still doesn't understand a lot of their behavior, and his lived experiences have lead him to believe that there are irreconcilable differences between humans and trolls. And both races would be better off if they stayed far apart from each other. So sort of a "We don't come up to Arcadia and cause problems why are these humans down here causing issues" perspective. Not to mention he thinks Jim might have been raised by humans for Nefarious Purposes (ie a guard dog), as this is something he's seen happen in the past with Calista/Deya and others.

Then of course Jim has to go and completely and utterly blow his mind by transforming into a human.

Coming September 16: Jim gets hit in the face with a horseshoe.

Chapter 7: Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Jim shifted uncomfortably under the uv light; part from the slimy, crawling sensation the light gave and part from the extended period of strained silence. He really wasn't sure how he'd expected these rock guys—

Trolls. They're trolls, he's a troll, you're a troll –

To react when he showed that he was really a human. Shock was understandable but the dead silence and bug-eyed stares were starting to worry hi—

Abruptly the older looking troll leaned down to hiss something in Blinky's ear, Jim had just enough time to see Blinky's eyes widen before he broke away and bolted out of the cave. Before he could even start to process that a large, gray hand filled his vision. The big mossy guy slowly reaching out towards him.

“Human...”

The second the purple light touched big guy's hand there was a soft sizzling sound, big guy jerking his arm away with a wince. Wait was that smoke coming up from—

A loud snort pulled his attention back to the big blue spiky guy, who's expression had gradually shifted from shock to seething rage, standing there panting through gritted teeth while he straight up stared daggers at Jim. All that combined with the nose ring reminded him of an

angry bull–

It suddenly hit him just how much bigger these troll guys were than him, and how much more breakable his spine was in this shape.

“Hey Tobes I think you can kill the light now,”

“Whoops, sorry, got it,”

The uv light and the slimy sensation vanished, Jim shifting back to his blue shape, letting out a small sigh of relief.

His relief was short lived as the older looking troll pushed past the angry spiky one and stalked towards Jim.

“So you claim to be human?”

“Uhhh.....yeah?”

The old troll tapped the tip of one of Jim’s horns, making Jim flinch.

“You don’t appear human at the moment,”

“I can kinda change back and forth,”

“ *Change?* ” the old looking troll whipped down until his face was

inches from Jim's, his milky gaze narrow, Jim shrinking under the scrutiny "How?"

"Well that's a bit of a complicated st--"

"How now changeling!"

From out of nowhere something flew in and smacked Jim on the face, sending him staggering back, clapping a hand to his cheek.

Whatever it was that had hit him fell to the floor with a clang. Jim slowly peeled his hand away, the blow had been far more shocking than painful, looking up to stare at Blinky, who was staring right back with all six of his eyes blinking.

"Umm *ow!*?"

Blinky swept forward, grabbing the object off the floor and pressing it, startlingly cool, up against Jim's face.

The beginnings of a low growl rumbled out of the back of Jim's throat before he caught himself, stepping back and shoving Blinky away from him. With the distance he could finally see the object in Blinky's hands.

It was a horseshoe.

Blinky looked at Jim then down at the horseshoe "Well that was... unexpected,"

“Actually I think that was a very expected response to having a horseshoe thrown in your face,” Mary said snipily.

Blinky– well, blinked at her “Horseshoe?”

“Never mind that,” the older troll gave an impatient wave “Blinkous, the rest of them,”

“Ah, yes, of course,,”

Without warning Blinky surged forward and pressed the horseshoe against Mary’s cheek.

“ *Hey!* ” she slapped him away “What the hell!?”

Blinky ignored her and moved towards Claire with the horseshoe. Claire frowned and tried to step back only to be blocked by the big mossy guy standing behind her. Allowing Blinky to touch the horseshoe to her face as well.

Toby and Darci didn’t try to run, allowing Blinky to tap them with the horseshoe with matching grimaces and a muttered ‘personal space much’ from Toby.

“Ok seriously,” Jim stomped towards Blinky “What is with the horseshoe!?”

“Well you see–”

Blinky was cut off by the old troll deftly plucking the horseshoe from his hands and tucking it into his waistband.

“No matter, we might not be certain of what you are but now we are certain of what you are not,”

“Ok enough with the cryptic answers,” Claire approached them, hands on her hips “What’s going on he–”

“ He can’t be the Trollhunter! ”

Everyone, human and troll, whipped around towards the big spiky guy, who somehow looked even more pissed off.

“He’s not a real *troll!* ” he slammed a fist into the side of the cave wall, making the whole cavern shudder, tools on the table rattling.

The older troll rushed to his side, grabbed him by the horn, and yanked his head down “Lower your voice!” he hissed “Do you want to alert all of Trollmarket of this...irregularity,”

“Trollmarket deserves to know that the amulet is in the hands of–”

“While I admit the amulet’s choice is...unprecedented,”

Old troll and spiky troll shared a look at Jim that made him more than

a little uncomfortable.

“But while I’m not sure of what exactly he is, we *know* he isn’t–”

The next word was something coarse and guttural, not in english, something completely unlike any other language Jim had heard.

“And I will not risk inciting mass panic by having the entire market speculate otherwise. So as far as the rest of Trollmarket is concerned, our new Trollhunter is an ordinary stripling, albeit one that keeps... peculiar company,”

Jim frowned “Hey, leave my friends out of this,”

Old and spiky completely ignored him, spiky too busy gawking at old’s words “You expect me to conceal the truth like some kind of–”

“ *Conspiracy!* ”

They all whirled at Blinky’s shout, two of his hands clasped to his cheeks in horror, a third hand pointed accusingly at the old troll.

“Can it be so!? Am I witnessing the birth of a dreaded conspiracy orchestrated by our market’s elder himself right before my six eyes!?”

“See!?” spiky threw a hand towards Blinky “The scholar agrees with me, Trollmarket must know!”

The old troll pinched the skin– stone between his eyes. Jim was still figuring out how to clock trolls’ facial expressions, but he didn’t need to be an expert empath to tell that this guy was completely done.

Abruptly the old troll looked sharply back up at Jim “You, Trollhunter, is there a sanctuary you can rest at on the surface?”

“Ummm...yeah?”

“Good, go there with your companions, AAARRRGHH will escort you to the surface. Return to the bridge tomorrow at dusk, we will discuss more then. In the meantime I will smooth things over here,”

Spiky scoffed “You can’t truly expect us to–”

“One conspiracy breeds more, today the Trollhunter’s a human, tomorrow gnomes will rule the market!”

The big guy– AAARRRGHH presumably, gently nudged Jim’s shoulder, urging him towards the exit. Stretching his considerably long arms out to herd them all towards the exit of the cave. Confused but eager to get away from the yelling, which was steadily increasing in volume, Jim complied, and after glancing and making sure AAARRRGHH wasn’t being too rough with the others, allowed the large troll to herd them out the door.

AAARRRGHH took a different direction than Jim had coming here; old, spiky, and Blinky’s shouts fading behind them as he led them through a narrow stone corridor– well narrow for his size, you could probably drive a truck through this hall. Eventually leading them back to the crystal staircase towards where they’d come in.

“So uh...” Toby craned his head back, trying to get a glimpse at the top of the stairs “You guys don’t happen to have some magical version of an elevator? Or maybe even an escalator?”

“El...ooh...vay...tor?”

Toby huffed a deep sigh “Of course you don’t,”

Despite literally everything Jim could help but crack a smile “Relax Tobes, I can give you a lift,”

“Not on your life,” Toby clamored up to the first step “Do you know how many points this is worth on my chubby tracker? I’m doing this,”

“Hey if you’re offering free rides I’ll take you up on it,”

Jim started and glanced down, spotting Mary standing right next to him staring up at him completely unashamed.

“What? It’s a miracle I didn’t break a nail during our run from tall dark and ugly, no way am I risking my manicure over stairs,”

“No problem,” Jim crouched down, allowing Mary to climb on his back “But say one word about a hair care routine and I’m dropping you,”

They began their ascent, Jim taking an easy lead even while carrying Mary. The others were a lot slower, having to use all four limbs to scale stairs that were clearly made for much larger creatures, even Jim

had to do a little hop between steps. AAARRRGHH could have probably easily outpaced them all, but he hung back, bringing up the rear with no doubt deliberate slowness.

Soon enough they reached the top, Jim letting Mary down while Darci eyed the entrance uneasily “So the guy who tried to kill us earlier is gone now right?”

AAARRRGHH nodded “Bular gone,” he reached out holding a pointed, glowing orange crystal, drawing a glowing arch in the wall with its tip. Once it was complete the wall beneath the arch crumbled away, revealing the empty canal on the other side.

Jim and the others cautiously stepped through, the second they were through the wall started rebuilding itself. AAARRRGHH waving at them from the rapidly rematerializing wall “Bye, see tomorrow,”

Then the wall was sealed and he was gone, leaving the five of them standing in the canal. No trolls, no Trollmarket, no glowing crystals, no nothing. Bare concrete lit with sickly yellow streetlights. A car rumbled on the bridge overhead.

For a few seconds they stood there in silence, glancing around at each other with uncertain looks. Mary opened her mouth, but before she could get a word out a loud series of chimes and beeps filled the formerly silent canal. All five of their phones going off simultaneously. They all scrambled to pull them out while Jim held still. His phone was sealed up in his armor, honestly he was still trying to figure out the physics of where his clothes went when the armor appeared, but he saw Toby pull out his phone, and saw who all the notifications were from.

Jim winced, oh this was *not* going to be good.

“Here let me,” he held out a hand “It’ll probably be better if I’m the one who talks to her,”

Toby plunked the phone down in his armored hand with no hesitation “Better you than me dude,”

In the time it had taken Toby to hand off his phone it had chimed five more times. Too many texts and voicemails to check, better just call right away and rip the band aid off. Swallowing hard, Jim pressed the dial button, lifting the phone to his ear as it rang, the other side picking up in just two rings.

“Hey mom,” he spoke up before she could get a word out “Some stuff happened but we’re all fine. We’re underneath the bridge on Main, can you come pick us up? I can explain more face to face but we uh....we learned a lot...”

Chapter End Notes

So because Jim's transformation comes from a tainted vial of Merlin's troll potion, and not Mogana's magic working through a troll and a human familiar, a gagglestick does absolutely nothing to him. Jim's transformation is solely caused by his environment, being under sun/not or underground, and to change what form he's in his environment has to change.

An announcement and a bit of unfortunate news. I am working on a TOA Halloween special fic for this year. I'm going to start posting it on October 1st and update continuously throughout the month. I'll post a more detailed teaser of this Halloween fic on tumblr later this week. But because I'm going to be busy with the Halloween special I won't have time to post the next chapter of this fic until November, so there will be an eight week gap between chapters instead of a four week one.

Coming November 11th: Barbara wasn't sure what she was expecting the kids to find in the canal, but whatever it was, this wasn't it.

Chapter 8: Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“So yeah that’s basically everything, you have any questions?”

Barbara sat in the driver’s seat, fingers locked around the steering wheel even though the keys were in her pocket. Staring out the windshield into the dark parking lot. Wondering exactly what choices she’d made in her life that had brought her here.

When she finally got back in contact with the kids after over an hour of radio silence they’d promised her a full explanation. Wanting both to hear that and reassure herself of their safety, Barbara had all but raced to the canal to pick them up. When she’d gotten there they requested that she stop at a parking lot so they could explain things in detail before she dropped them off at their homes.

She’d now been sitting in the back of the Walmart parking lot for well over an hour. Long enough for Mr. Scott to send a text querying when his daughter would be home.

She really shouldn’t leave him on Read for so long but honestly Barbara was still trying to put her brain back together.

“So...” she sucked in a deep breath and drummed her fingers on the wheel “You’re a troll...”

A single blue eye peered out of the trunk, peeking at her past the partially folded seat “Yep, that’s what I am alright,”

Barbara looked at him in the rearview mirror with her mouth pressed into a thin line. She still wasn't thrilled about Jim riding in the car that way, but the fact remained that with all six of them there just weren't enough seat belts to go around. And if they were in an accident Jim was the least likely to get hurt and the most likely to inadvertently hurt someone else. That and watching him tear his way out of the locked trunk of a junker last summer killed all her protests.

That was what her brain choosing to focus on instead of the many many very shocking things they'd all just told her.

"So let me get this straight. Jim is a...troll. Another troll tried to... attack you..."

Another thing Barbara couldn't let herself think about for too long without getting heart palpitations.

"Because that amulet you have belongs to the Troll...hunter, and you were saved by two other trolls that took you into an underground city full of trolls,"

"Yeah that's what happened alright," Mary mumbled.

Barbara didn't say anything else, just kept straight ahead at the parking lot, brightly lit with streetlights, empty save for her car, two trucks, and a smart car. All of these ordinary things somehow existing in the same world as trolls and magic and underground cities and— oh what the hell, maybe unicorns to!?

She tightened her grip on the wheel and pulled in a deep breath through her nose, if she didn't focus on her deep breathing she was going to scream.

God she wanted to call Rose right now.

Instead of voicing any of that she cleared her throat and only spoke when she was sure her voice would be even “So what exactly is this Troll-hunter, because if Jim and the...others are trolls does that mean Jim is supposed to...hunt them?”

“We’re not sure,” Claire spoke up from the back seat “When we showed them that Jim was human Blinky and the spiky troll started freaking out. So the old troll kinda chased us out the door. But he made us promise to come back tonight,”

“Ok,” Barbara let out a heavy breath, pinching the bridge of her nose to try and dispel the oncoming tension headache “Ok...”

“Mom?” Jim poked his head a little further out of the trunk “You ok?”

I'm the parent, you're the children, children who were nearly hunted down by an angry troll– Trolls , which are real apparently, I should be asking you that

“Yeah, I’m fine,” she turned back to face her passengers again “How are you all doing?”

Darci twiddled her thumbs “Ok...ish,”

“Yeah okish pretty much sums it up,” Toby shifted in the passenger’s seat to face her “Really glad tall dark and spooky didn’t get us, but still kinda freaking out a bit inside. The whole learning about the

secret society living right under our feet thing takes a bit to sink in,”

“We should get more answers tomorrow night,” Claire added.

Barbara pressed her lips together but said nothing. She didn’t like how the kids just assumed she’d let them all go back to the mysterious underground troll city.

Especially since right now she couldn’t come up with any good arguments to stop them.

“We can make plans for tomorrow night after we’ve all got some sleep,” Barbara pulled the keys out of her pocket and started the engine “Right now we need to get you kids home,”

They all either nodded or made sounds of assent at that.

“Remember guys,” Mary said loudly “Our cover story is we were hanging out at Jim’s place and lost track of time playing Go Go Sushi,”

“Got it,”

“Affirmative,”

“Understood,”

“Crystal clear,”

Barbara bit back a heavy groan as she pulled the car out of the parking lot and onto the street.

Trolls.

Secret Cities.

Cover stories.

Just what had her life become?

Focusing on turns and street signs was easier to think about. Darci's house was closest and was the first one they stopped at. Less than ten seconds after Barbara's car pulled to a stop at the curb the door swung open and Louis came striding out.

Darci hopped out of the car and bounded up to him "Hi dad!"

"Hey there pumpkin," he flashed her a wide smile "How was your evening?"

"Good, we really got sucked into Go Go Sushi,"

"Alright," Louis turned his gaze towards Barbara, warmth sliding away into cool amiability "I take it you also lost track of time?"

Her throat tightened “Yes, sorry about that, I was busy and didn’t notice how long the kids were playing their videogames,”

Louis nodded “No worries, it happens,”

Barbara didn’t let out the breath she was holding until Louis and Darci were inside their house and she was already driving away. Dropping off Claire and Mary went similarly, with their parents mercifully skipping the third degree—

No, that wasn’t fair. It had been first or second degree at the worst. And it wasn’t as though he wasn’t completely justified with his suspicions. If it had been her and Jim in that position Barbara knew she would have been even more skeptical and less polite.

Pulling into the end of their cul de sac, Toby hopped out and ran up to his house. Barbara watched and made sure he made it inside before pulling into their garage.

Barbara killed the engine the second they were inside, slumping back in her seat and shutting her eyes, a shuttering sound in her ears as the garage door shuffled closed behind her.

“Mom?”

From the backseat she heard the soft slide of Jim folding down the seat, shuffling sounds as he crawled out of the trunk “Are you ok?”

The knee jerk response—

I'm fine hon

Rose up in the back of her throat, but Barbara bit it back before it could escape.

She shouldn't unload all her stress and worries onto her teenage son, but she shouldn't pretend everything was fine and dandy when they both knew it wasn't either.

"I...I'm worried, this is all a lot to take in,"

"Oh yeah," Jim let out a chuckle and a gusty exhale "I'm right there with you on that one,"

Despite the situation Barbara felt a tiny smile twitching at the corners of her mouth. Finding it in her to push away from the seat and turn to face him.

"I don't like the idea of you kids being in danger, or going back to a secret troll city by yourselves,"

She had to fight back an inappropriate laugh at the half stunned half affronted look on Jim's face, could already hear the protest he was forming, and cut him off before it could leave his mouth.

"Which is why I'll be coming with you,"

Jim's went blank, eyes going wide and mouth gaping open "Oh...I mean...are you sure you're up for it?"

This time she did laugh, twisting back to playfully punch Jim in the shoulder “Kiddo there’s not a single thing you or any other troll in this city can do to stop me from looking after my son. And if that means going to an underground city, well hand me my pickaxe and headlamp,”

Jim huffed a laugh again “Ok but...it’s...it’s kind of a lot down there, so if you want to sit it out...”

“Not a chance, we’re in this together, and any troll that wants a piece of you is going to get a taste of my krav maga first,”

Jim chuckled at that, and Barbara smiled back.

Chapter End Notes

For those who don't remember Rose is Barbara's therapist.

So Barbara is worried as heck, but she knows she can't outright ban them from being involved. So she does the next best thing and decides to go to Trollmarket herself.

And I hate to bring this up, because the overwhelming majority of my readers are absolutely lovely, but a few people have been complaining about the shorter chapters. I determine chapter length based on what feels best for the flow of the story, where the best stopping points and character shifts should be, as a result some chapters are shorter and some are longer. And I release all chapters, regardless of length, on a four week schedule as this is a pace I can maintain long term without burning out, and even if something unexpected comes up I can still get the chapters out on time. I know shorter, slower chapters can be frustrating, but I promise there's longer chapters in the mix up ahead.

Coming December 2nd: Local Arcadia teen has horrible-no-good-very-bad day.

Edit: Got the dates a bit mixed up, the next chapter will be

coming December 9th, not the 2nd.

Chapter 9: Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sun blasted in like laser beams through the open window, curtains that he'd stupidly forgot to shut hanging uselessly on either side, while the light blasted in. Searing straight through Steve's eyelids, waking him up far too early for a weekend.

He rolled over with a groan, squeezing his eyes shut.

Oh come on, it was the first weekend of the school year for crying out loud! The only time he could sleep in as late as he wanted, totally unfair that he was already awake this ear-

"Steve, breakfast!"

His eyes shot open.

That's right, how could he forget, Saturday breakfast!

Steve threw back the covers and practically jumped out of bed, throwing on his clothes and combing his hair in record time. Tromping down the stairs and rushing into the kitchen to where his mom was frying hashbrowns on the stove, a stack of fall-apart-if-you-touched-them crispy bacon strips already cooling on a paper towel line plate next to her.

She glanced up at him and smiled "Morning sweetie, how would you like your eggs?"

“Sunny side up please,” he spotted a partially cut vegetable lying on a cutting board “But keep that thing far away from them,”

Mom threw back her head and let out a sharp laugh “Hah! Kid if you want to get your hands on my avocado you’re going to have to do better than that,”

Steve snorted as he grabbed two plates and snagged a few strips of bacon for each of them “You caught me, it’s all part of my secret plan to use reverse psychology to steal the world’s most disgusting vegetable from you,”

She grinned before grabbing the partially cut avocado and giving a clumsy lunge towards him. Steve recoiling in feigned horror. Both of them laughing as they dished up their eggs and hashbrowns and took their seats at the table.

“You’re eggs are both sunny and funny mom,” he said, twirling a fork in her direction.

“Aww thanks sweetie, you sure I can’t tempt you with some of my avocado scramble—”

“Ahh no! Get it away!”

She grinned and waved a forkful of her green eggs in his direction, Steve gagging the whole time. They kept at it playing chicken with the avocado eggs until they were both laughing so hard they could barely sit up.

Soon their plates were empty, and after his mom chased him around the table with the empty avocado peel, they got started on the dishes.

Steve loaded the dishwasher as fast as he could, hopping straight over to dry while his mom washed the pans. Him and Seamus were going to shoot hoops today, and he wanted to get there early to beat the heat.

At long last the final dish was dry, Steve turned and got ready to race out the door—

“Do you have a minute?”

He staggered midstep, turning back towards his mom.

She flashed him a small smile “I won’t take up too much of your time, there’s just...something I want to tell you,”

Steve didn’t move, but the skin on the back of his neck prickling up. His mom was giving off big ‘I’m about to deliver world ending news while pretending like it’s no big deal’ vibes.

“What’s going on...” he said slowly.

His mom’s smile turned brittle “I’ve...been seeing someone...romantically,”

Steve froze, it was a good thing they’d finished with the dishes because if he’d been holding a plate he would have dropped it.

Mom dating someone felt...wrong, even though they'd been divorced for nearly three years he couldn't picture his parents with anyone but each other—

But his dad hadn't waited to start going out with the twenty year old intern at his office, even bringing her to one of their custody hearings. So it wasn't fair for his mom to be a nun for the rest of her life, even if it felt weird.

“Oh...ok, well I've got to meet Seamus at the park—”

“Steve I—” she stretched out an arm towards him before pulling it back, sucking in a deep breath “There's...more,”

The eggs and bacon rumbled uncomfortably in his stomach “What do you mean ‘more’?”

“The man I'm seeing...it's your old coach from school.”

The world around him crashed to a screeching halt.

“No.”

“Look I know you're not happy about this—”

“ *No!* There are literally *millions* of guys on the west coast and you have to date the one guy who kicked me off the basketball team!?”

“Steve I–”

“You can’t date Coach, you just can’t!”

In an instant mom’s jaw shut with a click, her eyes taking on an icy sheen. Squaring her shoulders and setting her mouth into a firm line.

“Steve you are allowed to feel however you feel about this,” her voice was frosty and sharp “And if me dating your old coach makes you angry and upset you are entitled to those feelings. But you do not get a say in who I do and do not date. End. Of. Discussion.”

Steve ground his teeth together, hands balled into fists trembling at his sides.

In the time before, back before twenty year old interns and having to do every last little thing through lawyers, back when dad was still at home, mom would have screamed back at him. Two shouting at each other turning into three when dad came in they all laid into each other.

Now his mom was a wall of ice, coldly turning away from him to place a pan back into place in the cabinet. And Steve knew from experience that any shouting on his part would only extend the frigid silence, sometimes even for days.

Face heating up, Steve spun and raced out of the room before he could completely lose it.

He grabbed his basketball out of the garage and just ran. Sprinting across five blocks before his heart couldn't take it any more and he had to slow down. Huffing and panting and sweating as he dribbled his ball as he made his way to the park.

The strain of the running helped him shove the helpless rage down. Forcing all the hot prickly uncomfortable things he didn't to feel away, until nothing but his burning muscles and the ball in front of him.

Step. Dribble.

Step. Dribble.

Step. Dribble.

Step—

“Hey lameass, it's about time you showed up!”

A grin stretch across Steve's face “Hey I was busy working on— *Think fast!* ” he slung the basketball in Seamus' direction.

Seamus caught it effortlessly. Grinning back as Steve approached.

“It's called being fashionably late, I've gotta build anticipation for the Palchuk,”

Seamus snorted and gave him a light punch in the shoulder
“Dickhead,”

Steve punched him back “Dumbass, now let’s quit wasting time and go shoot some hoops,”

The two of them headed up the sidewalk deeper into the park towards the courts, but as they got closer Steve heard a lot of screaming, or laughing, based on the lack of people freaking out it was probably laughing. Rounding the trees, him and Seamus spotted the courts and staggered to a stop.

The entire black top space had been covered in blankets and foam goals and plush balls. A bunch of really little kids tottered around the space, occasionally kicking the balls, while what he assumed to be their moms followed them around with their phones. There were a few dads in there, but it was mostly moms.

Steve just stood there staring with his jaw hanging open. There was absolutely no space for him and Seamus to play, let alone without the risk of nailing a toddler in the face, but he couldn’t think of a way to tell them to move without coming off as an asshole.

“Should we...”

“Forget it.” Seamus spun around with a scowl, stomping away from the courts “I already had my mom screaming at me this morning, last thing I need is a repeat,”

“R– right,” Steve scrambled to catch up “Let’s head to the rec center, their courts are just eight bucks an hour, I can spare that,”

Seamus perked up “Yeah, sounds great,”

Steve blinked, but the printout sign taped to the glass door didn’t change.

Closed for renovations

Unbelievable. It was like the whole freaking universe didn’t want them to play basketball.

Seamus shifted from foot to foot, wincing at the sign “Maybe we should–”

“Forget this,” Steve spun around “Let’s just head to Scoops Ahoy, malts are buy one get one free this week, so that’s two for you and me, plus two for any cute girls we see,”

“All right bring on the– wait,”

Seamus held out an arm, stopping Steve in his tracks. Steve pivoted his head to look in the same direction as Seamus only to freeze.

Sitting in the lobby at the cafe tables with the Arcadia Oaks Academy swim team, laughing and slapping each other on the backs, damp hair and t-shirts over swim trunks, was Logan. Logan who claimed he was too busy to hang out with them anymore because he was helping his sick grandma every weekend.

Logan's gaze landed on them, jerking in his seat, smile dropping off his face while Steve and Seamus glared at him.

Logan stood, mumbling something to the team mate next to him, and hustled for the side door, Steve and Seamus stalking after him. The three of them clustering up just outside the rec center.

"Grandma's real sick huh?" Steve spat, tucking his ball under one arm, leaving the other free to jab a finger into Logan's chest.

Logan winced, taking half a step back "Look it's- it's not what it looks like.

"Oh really?" Seamus got right up in his face "Because it looks like you've been ditching us for months to hang out with a lame-ass swim team,"

"It's- it's not because of you, I couldn't get a spot on the basketball team after changing schools and I need extracurriculars for scholarships--"

"So you decided to lie and ditch us," Steve stepped up to flank Seamus, Logan cornered by the two of them "If you wanna make this right you'd better get on your knees and start begging,"

Logan's expression wavered before abruptly hardening "You know what, *screw* this," he shoved Steve back a step.

"Yeah I ditched you, and it's cause you guys are the two biggest

douchebags in the state and I'm sick of hanging around you!"

Steve felt a snarl spreading across his face "Alright Logan because we've been friends for so long I'm going to give you a chance to take that back and apologize before I—"

"Before what!?" Logan got right up in his face with a growl of his own "Before you break my jaw and get kicked out of school again?"

Steve found himself staggering back, nearly losing his grip on his ball, mouth dropping open in shock.

"Dude!" Seamus swatted Logan on the shoulder, but Logan shoved him off.

"I'm going back to hang out with my *real* friends," Logan spun around and headed back into the rec center, pausing just inside the doorway, turning back to look Steve dead in the eye.

"Oh, one more thing, my parents didn't make me change schools after your suspension. I *asked* ."

Logan strode in and slammed the door behind him, leaving Steve and Seamus standing in the lurch.

Seamus growled, spinning around and punching a nearby tree, branches quivering and leaves shaking "Forget this, you had the right idea Steve. Ice cream. Girls. Let's go."

“Y– yeah,” Steve forced down the tremble in his voice before Seamus could hear it and squared his shoulders, striding ahead down the sidewalk, already dribbling his ball again “Logan wants to be a dweeb that’s his problem,”

The two of them didn’t say anything else as they made tracks for downtown, and in the first stroke of luck today there was no line at Scoops Ahoy.

For the first time today Steve didn’t have to force the smile spreading across his face as they headed inside and walked up to the counter “I’ll take two medium triple brownie milkshakes,”

“Two banana peanut butter shakes for me,” Seamus reached for his wallet, but Steve waved him off.

“I gotcha dude,”

“Hah!” Seamus grinned and smacked Steve on the shoulder “As always Steve you are the *man!* ”

A few minutes later the two of them walked out, a milkshake clutched in each hand and Steve’s basketball tucked under Seamus’ arm.

“Step one complete, now we just have to find some cute girls to share with,”

Seamus snorted “Easy, let’s set up at this bench and scout the perimeter,”

They carefully set their shakes down on the bench. Glancing around the street.

“Heads up,” Steve elbowed Seamus in the side to grab his attention
“Two babes at nine o’clock heading out of the jewelry store,”

“Sweet, they should be walking right past us so get ready to—”

“ *Seamus Callahan Johnson!* ”

Both of them jerked around, if they hadn’t set their ice cream down they would have dropped it.

Storming up the street shrieking like a banshee was Seamus’ mom
“Where have you been!? I’ve been texting you for over an hour!”

“My phone’s off, I told you this morning Steve and I were going to—”

“I don’t want to hear any excuses!”

Quick as a flash Mrs. Johnson snagged Seamus by the arm and started dragging him towards her car, where Steve could see Mr. Johnson sitting shotgun with his arms folded.

“My parents are setting up a new shed in the backyard, so we’re all going over to help, my sister and her kids have been there for an hour already so we need to get there *now!* ”

“Oh come on! Can’t I just skip this one?”

“No buts young man,” Mrs. Johnson practically threw him into the backseat “Family helps family,”

“At least let me grab my ice cream–”

Whatever else Seamus had to say was cut off by his mom slamming the door on him, rushing around to jump in the driver’s seat.

Steve just stood there helplessly, jaw working open and shut with objections he couldn’t figure out to say as the car rapidly peeled away from the curve.

Then Steve was alone, standing there with four rapidly melting milkshakes.

He didn’t even have his ball, Seamus was holding it.

Steve found himself slumping down on the bench, chest feeling like it was collapsing in on itself.

Unbelievable, it was like the whole freaking universe was working against him. Not only was his mom dating *Coach freaking Lawrence* , Logan had completely ditched them for the academy swim team losers, now Seamus’s parents had dragged him away–

The two girls from the jewelry store walked by the bench, laughing and giggling, Steve not even registering in their sights.

Of course they didn't notice him, who'd pay attention to a dweeb that bought four milkshakes for himself.

A burning pricked in the back of his eyes, Steve dug his fingers into the flesh of his knee as hard as he could, gripping with bruising strength. Not daring to loosen his grip even when he managed to push back the pressure behind his eyes.

God he really was a loser—

“--well regardless of how tonight goes we still have the play to look forward to,”

“Trust me, that's just about the only thing keeping me sane right now,”

The second *that* voice hit his ears Steve froze, slowly lifting his head and twisting around.

“Yeah life's short,” Domzalski walked down the street, along with Nuñez, Mary, their friend whose name he couldn't remember, and none other than Steve's mortal nemesis *Jim* fucking *Lake*. Strolling along without a care in the world.

“That's why there's ice cream,”

“Shakes are buy one get one free today,” Wang said glancing down at her phone “There's five of us, so should we get four or six?”

“Six definitely,” Lake said with a laugh, making Steve grind his teeth
“We can share, maximize our flavor options, and I am definitely in the mood to do some stress eating today,”

“Make that two,” Nuñez said with a groan.

Her friend, who’s name he was pretty sure started with D, nudged her with a snicker “You worried about the tryouts or our ‘appointment’ tonight?”

“Both,”

Mary let out a sharp laugh “Trust Claire-bear to put a school play on the same level as all this craziness,”

“Hey,” Lake grinned, Steve wondered if he could nail him with a milkshake from this distance “No matter what roles we get or how the ‘appointment’ goes at least we’ll all be in the play together—”

From there the sound cut off as the five of them stepped inside Scoops Ahoy. Leaving Steve seething with quiet rage.

Of course, of course the universe just *had* to kick him while he was down by rubbing Lake’s picture perfect life in his face. *He* was the one who’d ruined Steve’s life, gotten Steve suspended for totally bullshit reasons and then getting to walk away scott free. All while somehow tricking everyone else at school into thinking he was cool.

Steve ground his teeth so hard he thought they might crack, hands

balled into trembling fists, itching to punch something. Preferably Lake's smug face.

Well he couldn't fool Steve, Steve knew just what a crybaby loser Lake really was, and one of these days he'd find a way to make sure everyone else knew to. But thanks to that stupid permanent record he couldn't even get back at him, stuck listening to Lake and his friends gush about their stupid plans for the play–

His brain did a hard reset, leaving Steve frozen in place on the bench while it rebooted, replaying the snippets of the conversation he'd just overheard.

And just like that he had a plan, the perfect way to get back at crybaby Lake and put himself back on top.

Steve smirked to himself, standing and scooping up all four melting milkshakes, dumping them in the trash before heading down the street back towards his house. His mom should be at work by now so it should be safe to go back, and Steve had a lot of planning to do.

Chapter End Notes

Surprise! Steve chapter!

Steve's presence in the previous installments was minor, and his role here won't be huge to start with. But Steve will grow to be a major player in this story with an arc of his own (I am going to make this boy WORK for his bully-turned-friend development).

The name of the ice cream place, Scoops Ahoy, is a reference to Stranger Things, another Netflix show I deeply enjoy (it was either extensively research ice cream chains in southern California and find one that would reasonably have a buy one get one free promotion, or make a Stranger Things reference. I made my choice).

And I know I am WAY behind on replying to comments, I promise

I will get to them all, it's just that right now things are pretty insane for me with the holidays, and all my spare time is going into keeping my update schedule. But I am planning on getting to replies eventually.

Coming January 6th: Barbara gets her first look at Trollmarket, and questions and answers are exchanged by both sides.

Chapter 10: Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Barbara shifted onto her other foot, there was a dented beer can to her right and a crumbled up fast food wrapper to her left. Lit under the sickly yellow glow of streetlights, natural light faded near to nothing, the sun having set twenty minutes ago.

“Are you kids sure this is the right spot?”

“Yep,” Toby grinned at her, stepping up to pat the concrete wall ahead of them “This is the place. Behind this wall lies a world of magic and wonder beyond your wildest dreams,”

A truck rumbled the bridge overhead, Barbara bit her lip, keenly aware of Toby ahead of her and Jim and the girls behind her, and tried not to look as skeptical as she felt.

It wasn't as if she doubted the kids, not at all, she knew they were all being very sincere. It was just that their story was a bit...unbelievable now that she was actually here standing under the bridge in front of a concrete wall surrounded by rubble and litter. But given the things she'd lived with over the last decade she of all people should keep an open mind.

“Oh! There is one more thing you should know,”

She turned towards Jim “What is it?”

He gave her an awkward smile, tusks on full display, ompletely covered in shining silver armor from the neck down. She'd asked about his choice to go down wearing something so...conspicuous, but he'd brushed her off with a quick 'when in Rome'. This didn't strike her as the full truth, but it was neither the time nor the place to push it.

“Well you see...when it comes to...trolls, I’m uh...I’m one of the little guys,”

She looked up at him with a start. Little guys? What did he mean by–

A soft crackling pulled her attention back to the wall, a glowing arch appearing in the concrete right before her eyes, blasting away all her doubts. The gray stone crumbled away from the blue arc, creating an entrance where none existed before, falling back to reveal–

Barbara staggered back on reflex, a scream rose up in the back of her throat, though thankfully she stopped herself before it could escape. But a large part of her still itched to run as fast and far as she could.

A massive creature– a *troll* , stepped through the arch. He had had horns and stony skin just like Jim, but that was were the similarities ended. This creature lumbered forward leaning on his hands like a gorilla, powerful arms wide as tree trunks. He had to be nine- ten feet tall standing upright. As it was he towered over all of them, Jim included. The troll wore no clothes but had a massive, mossy mane running down his back, growing into his beard and covering his chest as well. Ears were long and floppy, a dark snout with vertical slit nostrils in place of his nose. But despite his...disconcerting size, the troll's expression was gentle. Green eyes radiating calm as he stepped clear of the arch, bending his arms to lean down to look at them something closer to eye to eye.

“Welcome back,” he rumbled in a low, gravely voice.

Toby stepped up to the troll without hesitation, giving Barbara heart palpitations “Good to be back big guy,”

Meanwhile Barbara was still trying to figure out how to make her voice work, neck craning from looking up at the troll. Who it should be noted, was *bending down* .

So this was what Jim meant by ‘little guy’.

“Mom?” a gentle tap on her shoulder pulled her back down to earth
“You ok?”

“Y– yes I’m fine,”

The big troll let out a rumble, turning and inclining his head towards the still glowing archway “Come, AAARRRRGGHH will show,”

Still reeling, and trying to get her heart rate back into the resting range, Barbara let out a small cough to get the troll's attention
“Umm... sorry but what’s an Arrrgh?”

The troll raised a finger to point towards himself “AAARRRRGGHH is AAARRRRGGHH,”

So it looked like this...troll’s name was AAARRRRGGHH, that made as much sense as everything else.

“Well thanks for the showing us the way AAARRRGHH,” Darci strolled into the cave like this was entirely normal, the others following after a few moments later.

Barbara swallowed hard, fought back thousands of years of instinct in the back of her mind screaming at her to take the kids and flee far away from stone creatures and dark caves back to where there was light and crowds, and picked up her feet, following them into the unknown. She couldn't quite smother the flinch when the cave door reassembled behind her, sealing the exit.

Oh god what was she doing, there was no way out and no one knew where they were. She was one woman alone against an unfathomable number of trolls, and from the look of them one would be enough to overpower her with no effort at all. She needed to get out *now*, *grab the kids*, *find the nearest exit*, *run before --*

Barbara stopped in her tracks, netting her hands together and pressing them over her stomach, forcing her breathing to stay even. She ran through the various symptoms and stages of organ failure in her head until her breath was under control. Her heart was still speeding but it was no longer galloping. Her moment of panic had been brief enough the others hadn't noticed, trailing only a few feet behind them.

She needed to *focus* , even if her panic was justified this was the absolute last place to lose her head. And she shouldn't let her preconceived biases color her perception. The...people here had helped the kids, given them shelter and protected them from the troll that had tried to harm them.

So they were gigantic and made of rock, so what? Jim was the same and he was one of the sweetest, most harmless people she knew. Heck, for all she knew trolls considered *them* scary.

Uh oh, she'd fallen too far behind. A large gap had formed between her and the rest of the group, Jim had stopped and turned and was staring after her concerned, Darci had noticed and was now doing the same. It was only a matter of time until the rest of the kids took notice of her hesitation, then AAARRRRGGHH surely would.

Barbara flashed Jim the most reassuring smile she could manage and hurried to catch up with them. Jim and Darci didn't quite look convinced, but they turned back and kept moving. The seven of them heading deeper into the earth.

But even though they were underground it wasn't dark, a cool blue glow came from ahead. Following AAARRRRGGHH they approached the source of the light. A glowing crystal staircase carved into the bedrock leading down into depths unknown.

Barbara was not thrilled at the idea of going even deeper underground than they already were, but AAARRRRGGHH had already started to descend, the kids right behind him. And with how steep the stairs were if she didn't close the distance between them now she'd end up falling behind.

And as much as she did *not* want to go down there, the thought of abandoning the kids to the unknown was even less appealing.

Acutely aware of the pounding of her heart, Barbara took a deep breath, then lowered her foot to the first step.

The descent wasn't an easy one, the stairs were steep and so far apart she had to tread carefully to avoid slipping and twisting a leg. They were clearly made with larger creatures in mind. And now matter which angle she twisted and peeked at, she couldn't see how far down

they went.

She snuck another glance at AAARRRGHH, who was traversing the stairs with no trouble. Only this time she noticed something she'd overlooked before. AAARRRGHH's feet and legs were tiny. Both compared to her own and in proportion with the rest of his body. From head to toe his legs only made up one third of his body length, maybe less. Compared to his arms they were even tinier. His feet were an unusual shape to, small and rounded with only three visible toes.

This made sense with his gorilla-like gait and posture, but it was a radical difference from Jim's own anatomy. While Jim did have the horns, tusks, and stone skin this other troll did, his proportions were human, or at least similar enough that Barbara had never noticed a difference.

Come to think of it there were other differences, AAARRRGHH's ears, the shape and placement of his...snout she supposed, the markings on his chest and arms, she hadn't been able to get a good look at his hands but AAARRRGHH's seemed to have fewer fingers. And it was stumpy but he had a small tail as well.

Jim was human shaped with stone skin, horns, and tusks. But AAARRRGHH was something else entirely. Was Jim's shape the 'norm' for trolls or was AAARRRGHH's? Or were trolls so varied in their body types that they didn't have a norm as she would understand it?

Barbara was so caught up in speculative anatomy that it came as a surprise when they reached the bottom of the stairs, a large arch ahead of them with more light pouring in.

AAARRRGHH's silhouette blocked off most of the entryway, preventing her from seeing what lay ahead "Stay close," he rumbled,

heading through into the beyond.

She and the kids stepped after him, trading a narrow stone cavern for a much more open space. Barbara blinking in the sudden brightness, as her vision cleared shock slowed her footsteps, until Barbara was standing there frozen, gaping at the sight unfolding in front of her.

When the kids had told her about an underground city the first image that popped into her mind was of homeless encampments in abandoned subway tunnels that she remembered watching on the news as a kid. Given that they'd also said it was a 'magical' underground city, she knew the reality was probably a bit more polished than her knee jerk impression.

But nothing her imagination could have dreamed up could have ever prepared her for what laid ahead of her.

They were standing in an absolutely massive cavern, so large that she felt a little exposed despite being underground, an entire metropolis sprawled out before them. The city had been carved and built from the bedrock of the cavern itself. Stone dwellings stacked up in hive like clusters of varying sizes, some clinging to the the sides of the cavern wall itself, only discernible by the glow of their windows in the distance. The entire cavern was alight with color, blue and purple crystals clinging to the walls and scattered between buildings, filling the space with cool light. Smaller, paler crystals stood atop narrow stone columns and tucked into the corners of buildings like crystalline streetlights. Which was probably exactly what they were. Rock and crystal where overwhelmingly dominant, but a second glance revealed pops of fabric and wood. A wheelbarrow, a purple tent, stacks of baskets and multicolored awnings. A rainbow of colors scattered across gray stone.

But what took her breath away was the people.

Dozens of them, maybe hundreds, more than she could count, milling in and around the carved out buildings and through the stone cobbled streets. Stone skin of various colors. Some built thick and stocky, others wiry and slender. Horns of all shapes and sizes, some even in clusters of two or three. One eye, two or three, extra limbs and digitigrade legs. Clothing was varied, some were as naked as AAARRRGHH, some wore kilts with no shirt, some wore shirts with no pants. And while most of them were certainly bigger than Jim she was relieved to see that AAARRRGHH seemed to be as big as they got. No two were the same, but each and every one of them was like Jim—

Barbara couldn't move, standing there absolutely stupefied, her heartbeat high and fluttering as she gazed out at the vast city before her.

This...all of *this* was right beneath their feet for the past ten years, this whole time....

A hand on her shoulder snapped her out of it.

"You doing ok I know all this...." Jim stretched out an arm and gestured towards the mystical stone metropolis in front of them "Can be...a lot,"

Barbara recovered and laid her hand over Jim's, squeezing his armored fingers while glancing up at him with a smile "It is...quite an adjustment, but I'm ok, let's keep going,"

AAARRRGHH led them down one of the narrow streets winding between the buildings, trading open space for a crowded corridor. Shops and stalls lined either side of them, positively bustling with activity. One troll dumped a cartful of light bulbs into another's barrel, another ladled out bowlfuls of a thick steaming something to the trolls

who were lined up in front of a massive cauldron, two trolls shouting at each other in a guttural language that was certainly not english, the subject of the argument appeared to be an old static television of all things tucked under one of the pair's arms, off to the side in one booth a troll leaned over a seated troll with-- Wait was that a chisel?

Apparently the markings on AAARRRGHH's chest and arms weren't a natural pattern.

There was so much going on, so many different sights and sounds and smells. Despite knowing how decidedly *not* safe it would be to do so, part of Barbara itched to break off from the group, explore all the new, fascinating things around them.

A quick glance at the kids ahead of her told her they were feeling the same way. They were all glancing around with stars in their eyes, darting this way and that to get a closer look at whatever had grabbed their attention.

"What kind of skulls are those!"

"Hang on I think there's an apothecary over there--"

"Have you guys *seen* this embroidery!" Mary's phone was in her hand taking a near constant stream of photos.

"Can I live down here I totally want to live down here..."

Without even realizing it they were drifting farther and farther away from each other, a space growing between them and AAARRRGHH as they fell behind. And their heads weren't the only ones turning...

The troll by the cauldron had dropped his ladle and was gaping at them in wide eyed shock, the troll being chiseled grabbed the chiseler's arm, pointing at their group while letting off a rapid fire of that same guttural speech. The two trolls who had been arguing over the tv stopped shouting to turn and stare, both their faces twisted with matching expressions of rage--

The observation sobered her in an instant, Barbara was suddenly very keenly aware of the growing distance between each of them and their escort. She quickly rushed forward and grasped Claire by the elbow, gently but firmly pulling her away from the table full of crystal carvings and back towards the center of the street.

"Come on kids let's try to stay together, we've got a schedule to keep,"

She strode over and reached up to grab Jim by the shoulder from where he was staring at the chiseler's booth.

"That means you to kiddo,"

Jim grinned sheepishly and followed her back towards the center of the street "Right, sorry,"

Barbara quickly corralled the others, Toby grumbled a little bit but Mary was easy because she was too busy taking pictures to protest, Claire having herded Darci back in while she was busy with the others. Once all six of them were gathered together again Barbara hurried them along as urgently as she could without slipping into outright panic, making a concerted goal to keep all the kids close and close the gap between them and AAARRRGHH.

Only when AAARRRRGGHH was a mere six feet ahead of them did Barbara risk a glance at the trolls around them.

They were still turning more than a few heads, but fortunately the predominant emotion seemed to be abject shock instead of hostility.

Still not ideal but Barbara would take what she could get.

Eventually their street opened up into a wide courtyard, ahead of them was a set of steps leading up to a larger cave dwelling, stepping off the street and into the building, following AAARRRRGGHH down a narrow hall lit with small orange crystals embedded in the stone.

They followed him through narrow twists and turns until they reached a room that was entirely made of the same orange crystal as the hallway lamps. It wasn't as impressive as the view of the cityscape, but it still took Barbara's breath away. The entire space seemed to glow with the warm light of the crystals surrounding them, giving the room a cozy atmosphere. Still, as comfortable as it looked she couldn't afford to get swept up and drop her guard.

She adjusted her glasses and flicked her gaze from side to side, surveying the large room. Barbara's best guess was that this space was some sort of workshop. There were a few desks and what appeared to be workbenches scattered about, their surfaces littered with tools ranging from recognizable to completely foreign.

But most importantly, the room was occupied.

Standing at the largest table were two trolls, a smaller blue one with six eyes and four arms, this must have been Blinky, and a taller pale one. Both of them turning and standing at attention at their arrival.

Barbara wasn't quite sure how trolls aged, she lacked the context and the wide field of background knowledge to make any conclusions about the ages of any trolls she saw. But if she had to hazard a guess she'd say the troll next to Blinky was an older one. His mane and beard were snow white and hung nearly all the way down to his kilt; large, twisting horns grew out of either side of his head, larger than both Jim's and AAARRRGHH's. He was holding a large cane- staff? That appeared to be made from the same crystal as the room.

His eyes were completely milked over, no discernible iris or pupil, if Barbara had seen that in a human she would have assumed they were blind, but there was nothing unseeing about the shrewd way those pale eyes narrowed, the troll they belonged to briskly striding towards them.

“Oh wonderful, *more* humans, why even bother with secrecy anymore? Why not invite the entire city down for the next festival,”

Toby perked up “Really?”

The old troll shot him a sour look that silenced Toby in an instant.

Barbara dug her fingers into her palms and fought the urge to fidget. She was nervous-- scratch that she was terrified. They were way out of their depth here and the slightest misstep could land them in serious trouble. But running away wasn't an option, both physically and personally. This was the closest they've ever been to real answers, about what Jim was and what happened to him, and Barbara needed to see this through, and she owed it to Jim and the other kids to take the lead.

Forcing herself to move, Barbara approached the older troll “Pardon

me, I know our presence is an intrusion in your...city, but as Jim's mother I--"

Several pairs of rapidly blinking eyes over a wide grinning mouth filled her vision, Barbara jerking and taking an involuntary step back.

"Our Trollhunter's mother! Bah-buh-rah!" Blinky rushed up to her, Barbara only barely managing to squash the urge to scramble back away from him "You must be so proud! Please let me know if there is anything we can do to accommodate your stay in our humble market,"

Barbara somehow found the wherewithal to nod back "Th-- thank you, Blinky right?"

Impossibly Blinky's grin got even wider "Indeed, I am Blinky, principal scholar and librarian of Trollmarket, and it is my honor to welcome you and your party to our fair market,"

From out of nowhere Blinky started vigorously waving all four of his arms.

The action was so out of nowhere Barbara could only blink back at him. Could trolls...fly? Because that seemed to be what Blinky was trying to do.

"Umm...what are you doing?" Mary spoke up.

Blinky paused, arms still splayed out midair "Is not shaking hands the traditional human greeting?"

From behind she heard Toby let out a chuckle "He's a little confused but he's got the spirit,"

Meanwhile Barbara managed to fight back a very inappropriate laugh and compose herself, Blinky might have some...misconceptions about human culture, but he was friendly and seemed to be happy to have them here. And right now that was immeasurably valuable.

"Thank you for the greeting Blinky,"

The blue troll practically glowed with happiness, Barbara managed to smile back as she stepped around him to look back up at the old troll "And I understand that all of us being here makes things more complicated, but Jim is involved, and as his mother I have a right to know what is going on mister..."

"I am known as Vendel," the older troll tapped his staff on the ground "Elder of Trollmarket, the one responsible for dealing with this mess your son and his companions of have caused,"

The words were spoken with no small amount of exasperation, but Vendel still turned and gestured for them to follow as he approached a desk.

Still not ideal but Barbara would take what she could get here. She stepped up to the desk, hearing the soft scuffle of sneakers on stone, along with the distinctive click of metal, as the kids followed her "Now from what Jim told me, I understand that this amulet--"

Her eyes flickered over to Jim hovering just over her shoulder, amulet still affixed to his chest, ticking softly.

"Chose him as this 'Trollhunter'. What exactly does that mean?"

Vendel let out a heavy breath, flipping open a book and pushing it towards them, Barbara got up as close as she could, the kids crowding in on either side, all six of them pressed up against the table staring down at the opened book. The book looked to be bound with actual leather, the pages velvety parchment, so heavy and large it clearly wasn't made with human hands in mind. The page it was opened to showed an inked illustration of a line up of several trolls, there was writing as well in a runic language Barbara didn't recognize. The trolls pictured were of various shapes and sizes, but all wearing silver armor--

Her breath caught in her throat, gaze flickering over to Jim then back down at the book. Not just any armor, *Jim's* armor. And now that she knew what to look for she could spot the same amulet on each of the armored trolls as well.

"The Trollhunter is the guardian and protector of all Trollkind," Vendel reached over and tapped the page directly above the picture of a stocky troll with twisting, branch like horns "Our sacred champion, part of a legacy stretching back thousands of years,"

"Ok I gotta ask," Mary shouldered past Barbara and leaned forward over the table, snapping a few pictures of the open book with her phone "What's with the name? So I get that this amulet chooses your new Batman or whatever, but why do you call them the Trollhunter? For you guys that sounds more like some kind of supervillain name,"

Vendel's expression puckered but before he could speak up Blinky popped up beside him.

"I can answer that, you see the name 'Trollhunter' is a bit of a mistranslation, the closest this tongue can manage. In common trollish

the name is closer to 'The Troll who Hunts' or 'The Troll who is the Hunter',”

“So this Trollhunter...” Claire reached over, thumbing the edge of the page “This amulet...chooses them?”

“Correct,” Vendel reached over and flipped the page she was fondling. Now the book showed a close up illustration of Jim's amulet, the *Trollhunter's* amulet, surrounded by captions and notes in the same runic script.

“The amulet is a mystical artifact, crafted by Merlin and given to the first chosen hunter, Gorgus the Great nearly ten millennia past. It can be used to summon the daylight armor, and selects the new bearer of the mantle when the previous holder falls,”

Barbara traced her finger over the inked illustration of the amulet. It sounded like once this Trollhunter...died, the amulet would pick a new one, which was how it made its way to Jim. Which it could do because it was...magical. Barbara had questions about that, a lot of questions, but there were far more pressing matters right now so she'd save those for a later--

Abruptly Vendel pulled the book away and leaned down sharply, piercing all of them with a shrewd gaze.

“I have answered your questions, now you must answer one of mine,” Vendel briskly strode around the bench towards Jim, milky gaze boring into him “You claim to be human, so how is it that you can change your shape between human and troll?”

“Oh yeah, that,” Jim took a hesitant step towards him “Well I started out as completely human, like 24/7 365, then when I was little...I fell

into a potion. Ever since then I change into this," he gestured towards himself "Every sunset, plus when I go underground, and if I get hit with uv light while I'm a...troll I guess, it turns me back human, otherwise I change back at sunrise,"

Vendel leaned in closer, his face only inches apart from Jim's, staring him square in the eye, making Jim shift uncomfortably. Part of Barbara itched to intervene, but things didn't seem dangerous just quite yet, and butting in right now could very well do more harm than good.

After several moments of uncomfortable silence Vendel leaned back, shutting his eyes and letting out a soft breath, Barbara wasn't certain but it almost sounded like he was sighing in relief.

"Alright then," Vendel moved back around to the other side of the workbench, one hand gripping his staff the other folded behind his back "The amulet has never chosen a human as its champion before, and Trollmarket *cannot* know the truth, such an unprecedented choice for their protector would spark untold panic and confusion. Therefore what we will tell the masses is that *you* ," Vendel jabbed a finger in Jim's direction "Are the child of surface wandering exiles, and you sought out Trollmarket after the amulet chose you,"

Jim slowly nodded "Ok..."

"You will return here each night for your training, and your human companions will *not* ."

For the first time since coming down here Barbara allowed a frown to break through her composure, squaring her shoulders and reaching up to readjust her glasses while shifting her gaze towards Vendel.

She needed her vision sharp if she was going to be staring any of these trolls down.

“Um yeah, no way.” Claire perched her hands on her hips.

“You can’t just dangle trolls and a magical underground city in front of us and expect us to just walk away,” Toby said, throwing out his hands in exasperation.

Jim stepped to the front of the group and folded his arms “Yeah my gang and I are a package deal. Take it or leave it,”

Barbara sidestepped Jim and put herself in front of the group, raising her head to look Vendel in the eye, trying hard not to think about just how much bigger he was than her “And I don’t care what you or some amulet have to say about it. If my son is involved here then so am I,”

Vendel pinched his brow again and muttered something guttural, completely unlike english, before clearing his throat and scowling down at them "You know not what you ask. We are an old race, proud, slow to change. Humans have never been permitted to tread within our protected halls, and allowing so now, especially when our Trollhunter has their own...irregularity, would incite unimaginable chaos!"

Barbara folded her arms and narrowed her eyes "So your solution is to place the entirety of the burden of this cultural discrepancy on my son, who might I remind you, is a *child*! "

Vendel blinked back at her owlishly, all traces of grouchiness on his face replaced with abject surprise. He glanced backwards towards Blinky, who glanced over at AAARRRGHH. The three shared a look, a silent conversation.

"Hey I turn sixteen next month..." Jim mumbled from behind her.

Barbara sucked in a breath through her nose and bit back the many more, far less polite, words in the back of her throat.

She needed to keep her cool here, there was nothing to be gained by being snippy, even if she was one hundred percent in the right. Blinky and AAARRRRGGHH seemed friendly, and while Vendel was decidedly less so, he came off as more frustrated at the situation than hostile towards them. She had no reason to believe these trolls were her enemies, and nothing to gain by treating them as such.

"Look I understand this whole situation is less than ideal," Barbara risked a step towards Vendel "But the fact of the matter is, if my son is involved, then so am I. That is nonnegotiable."

"Yeah us to!" Toby piped up "Team sidekick is here to stay!"

"Ok we're not calling ourselves that," Mary groused.

In the interest of presenting a united front to the trolls Barbara didn't voice her own opinions on *that* particular matter.

Vendel held her gaze for the longest time, before slumping forward onto his walking staff with a sigh "Very well, you shall remain, both tonight and continuing on. But it is clear we have much to discuss, and you cannot wander around the market unescorted. Blinkous?"

Blinky-- or Blinkous it seemed, perked up at Vendel's words "Yes?"

"You and AAARRRGHH will lead our Trollhunter and his companions through the market. Look after them and show our new hunter exactly what it is he shall fight for and protect. Bah-buh-rah and I shall remain here to discuss how we are to proceed going into the future,"

Vendel paused and glanced towards her "Of course, only if this arrangement is agreeable to you,"

Barbara let out a breath she didn't know she'd been holding. Cooperation. Collaboration. Compromise. Maybe things weren't as overwhelmingly impossible as she thought.

"Yes that would be fine,"

If Blinky looked happy before he was practically radiant now "Splendid!" he clapped both sets of hands together "The chance to show newcomers, humans who've never before seen the marvels of trollkind, the glory of Trollmarket-- I would be delighted! Oh we simply must stop by my library first--"

"Hang on are we getting a tour?" Claire grinned and hurried over to Blinky "Because I would love a tour!"

Jim frowned and glanced towards Barbara "But we'd be leaving you by yourself here..."

Barbara smiled back at him and tried to project a calm she didn't feel. The thought of Jim or any of the kids leaving her sight in this strange underground place made her stomach twist. But like it or not she couldn't protect them from everything down here, and they needed to

indulge the trolls in the little bit of trust they'd earned. These trolls had saved them and given them sanctuary once, if Blinky said he'd look after them she believed him. There was still a *lot* she didn't know about trolls or this troll-hunting business, but her gut instincts, something she'd always relied on to keep her and Jim safe, were telling her that AAARRRGHH, Blinky, and Vendel didn't mean them any harm.

"I'll be perfectly safe discussing things with Vendel. You and your friends go take a look around, just remember to stay together and stay close to Blinky,"

Jim slumped his armored shoulders, wringing his hands together "It's just...I'm worried..."

"I give you my solemn oath as the principal elder of Trollmarket," Vendel moved closer, crystal staff clicking against the stone floor "Bah-buh-rah shall come to no harm this night, I will protect her with my own stone and my own life if need be,"

"See there you go," Barbara gave Jim the sunniest expression she could manage "Go, explore, you and your friends get the lay of the land. And don't forget it's my job to worry about you, not the other way around,"

"Come on Jim!" Toby called over from where he and the girls were gathered by the entrance to the cave with Blinky and AAARRRGHH, practically bouncing on his heels "We're getting a tour of the magical troll city!"

Jim's gaze flickered back and forth between him and Barbara, only stilled by her hand on his cheek.

"Go, I'll be fine. Vendel promised, and I'm promising to,"

Jim held her gaze, his expression deeply conflicted, before nodding his head, patting her fingers with his own before pulling away. He strode towards the entrance where the others were waiting, soon quickly enfolded in their excitement at the idea of exploration. The seven of them heading out of the tunnel and out of sight.

Barbara forced herself to turn away from the hall and back towards Vendel "Thank you for accommodating us, I know dealing with all this must be difficult for you,"

Vendel nodded his head in acknowledgment "I imagine this hasn't been easy for you as well," he moved back towards the largest desk and gestured for her to follow "But while circumstances are far from ideal for both of us, it is clear that we are far better off as allies than adversaries,"

He turned to face her across the work table, laying one hand down on the table "We do have a great deal to discuss regarding our Trollhunter-- your son's new role, but I must insist that we begin with another subject,"

He gestured for Barbara to take a seat at a bench alongside the worktable, she did so with only a slight bit of difficulty, feet dangling high above the floor, while Vendel did the same across from her.

"The circumstances of young Jim's transformation, the potion that altered him. I wish to know every detail, no matter how minute. I speak without exaggeration when I say that this knowledge is of dire importance for his future within Trollmarket,"

A sudden lump appeared in Barbara's throat. Discussing her greatest shame with someone she'd met all of ten minutes ago was the last

thing she wanted to do, even coming after following a troll to his hidden underground city. But Vendel was right, this was absolutely relevant, and he didn't strike her as the type to exaggerate. If Vendel said this was critically important she believed him. Of course it didn't make the prospect any more appealing...

But how else was she supposed to get explanations, answers, a cure? The only way out of this was forward, and trust ran two ways...

Barbara cleared her throat "Of-- of course. I'll tell you everything, but there's quite a bit to go over to give you the full context,"

Vendel nodded and gave her his full gaze "Speak your story in its entirety and I will hold my questions until you've finished,"

She nodded once more in acknowledgement then spoke up before she could lose her nerve "I guess this all started a little over ten years ago, with my ex husband..."

Chapter End Notes

So a lot of important stuff happens here, but the most impactful event was actually one of the subtlest. When the kids were starting to wander around the street and Barbara herded them back up, Jim included, it conveyed to all the trolls present that Barbara was the alpha/dominant one/one in charge of their group. Jim is very much a baby in their eyes, so trolls kind of "get" why he'd allow himself to be lead, even by a human. But Trollmarket's already started to develop a healthy respect for Barbara. Who is this mysterious human? Bold enough to grasp their Trollhunter by the shoulder and lead him. Must be a fearsome warrior indeed....

And Vendel is the grumpiest goat-pa of all time and I love him for that, he is constantly absolutely done with Blinky's and/or human teenage shenanigans. But he's also a leader, a diplomat, and he'd never let his own exasperation ruin potential negotiations. So once Barbara made a very valid point about her son being

underage, Vendel realized he needed to dial it back and start working with these humans.

Also important to notice is that Barbara is still exploring the possibility of a "cure" for Jim's shapeshifting condition.

I am so looking forward to exploring Vendel and Barbara's friendship, they respect each other a great deal and both care for Jim deeply and want what's best for him, but they also have very different ideas of what "best" is.

Coming February 3: The kids get a tour of Trollmarket and run into a familiar unfriendly face.

Chapter 11: Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“This way Master Jim!”

Jim forced himself to tear his gaze away from the table heaped with bundles of dried mushrooms, each one smelling more interesting than the last, and raced to catch up, noting that each of the others was still close by before slowing to a walking pace.

Speed wasn't an issue, he could keep up with Blinky just fine, the problem was doing so while his attention was constantly pulled in a million different directions at once.

Bright signs and glowing crystals. Guttural shouts and growls in the distance that set his teeth on edge, foreign smells that didn't smell great, but still made his stomach rumble. To make things worse, not only was his brain working overtime trying to take everything in, if he didn't have Toby, Mary, Darci, and Claire in his awareness at all times his anxiety went into overdrive.

He'd find himself thumbing through stacks of soft leather only to realize that he couldn't hear Darci's footsteps, racing back over to the group, heartbeat not slowing until he spotted her lingering in front of what he guessed was a restaurant. AAARRRGHH, bringing up the rear of their group, would hustle them along and keep anyone from drifting too far away, then something else would snag Jim's attention and it would start all over again.

And while the others might not have super senses, their attention was just as divided as his was.

Toby bustled around tapping various rock and crystal formations, Mary was buzzing all around, holding her phone up this way and that taking rapid fire shots. Darci's pace was slow as she surveyed everything around her with a wide-eyed gaze while in contrast Claire was positively giddy.

"This place is totally awesomesacue!" Toby ran his hand over an engraved wall, only for the 'wall' to stand up and turn around to reveal a very unhappy looking troll.

The troll glowered at Toby and let out a low, rumbling growl.

The countless signals bombarding Jim's brain condensed into a single exclamation point. Crossing the distance in two strides, shouldering between them and Toby, staring the troll square in the eye and shooting a sharper growl back.

The troll blinked and quickly backed off, hurrying away down the street. Toby glancing back and forth between them and Jim.

"You ok there Jimbo? I've never heard you make a sound like that before,"

Jim snapped his jaw shut "Y-- yeah, I'm fine,"

He needed to stop being so frazzled by everything and get it together. Being down in this weird troll city, surrounded by people-- trolls just like *him*-- was messing with his head, fraying at his nerves and stirring up things in the back of his brain he'd buried a long time ago. Jim had to get himself under control, if he let himself slip there was no telling--

“ *Quickly* please,” Blinky called out from ahead of them, two hands on his hips and the other two folded across his chest.

A scuff of stone on stone, gentle thuds vibrating through the ground, a soft puff of breath on the back of Jim's neck and then AAARRRGHHH was behind him. Bending down low and pressing his snout into Jim's back, nudging him along. Two more pushes from AAARRRGHHH finally got Jim moving again, striding ahead Toby keeping pace with him and the girls following shortly behind.

Which was admirable on his part because Jim's stride was a lot longer than Toby's and he practically had to jog to keep up.

"Much better," Blinky spun back around, folding both sets of arms behind his back and continuing on down the street “Make sure to stay together, Trollmarket is vast and we can't afford to have one of you getting lost,”

A sobering thought, Jim glanced around at the rest of the group, trying to position it so that each of them was in arm's reach. Worst comes to worst he could grab each of them under his arms and book it to the--

A sudden sensation of overwhelming warmth made Jim halt in his tracks; Toby, Mary, Darci, and Claire all stopping and looking up at him curiously.

If all the other things nagging on his senses down here were flashlights this was a lighthouse, so powerful it easily overwhelmed all the other sensations bombarding his brain.

Mary stepped up to him, phone lowered and eyes sharp "What's wrong?"

"I..." Jim glanced around, trying to figure out what kind of underground bonfire was going on only to spot Blinky standing just a few feet away, mouth curled into a knowing grin.

"I see you've sensed it. Right this way then, we're almost there,"

He turned and strode away, turning a corner ahead, AAARRRRGGHH urging them to follow along. Jim hardly needed the motivation, he hurried after, burning desire to see just what *this* was nearly overpowering the part of his brain screaming at him to not let his friends out of his sight. The sound of four light sets of footsteps, and one set of heavy ones, kept him anchored as he ran ahead, the street dead ending with a short stone wall overlooking a wide gully, nearly half the size of this whole cavern, and on the other side--

Jim was faintly aware of his run slowing to a walk, slowing to a complete stop as he came up to the wall, gripping the edge of it to brace himself while he leaned over the wall to stare across the gully. The scuff of sneakers on stone echoed in his ears, but that was the only other thing he was aware of as the gigantic *burning* crystal towering on the far side of the gully swallowed up all of his other senses.

The only thing he could think to compare it to was a space heater, but comparing *this* to a space heater was like calling a scented candle a bonfire. Even from across the gully it was almost overpowering. It was so...so *warm*, but also like nothing he ever felt, he was both the most relaxed he'd ever been and the most energized. The closest thing he could compare it to was being in a warm bath after having six cups of coffee, but in all the good ways without any of the bad things that came with it like being dizzy or jittery.

The crystal giving off the strange warmth was absolutely massive, easily dwarfing all the others crystals he'd seen so far. If it wasn't the size of a skyscraper it was close. A golden orange crystal monolith radiating that soothing, exhilarating warmth.

“Everything alright?” Toby stepped up to the overlook wall next to him, Mary, Darci, and Claire right alongside him “Looking a little unsteady there,”

Jim glanced from the others to the giant crystal and back again “Do you guys feel that?”

Darci squinted at the crystal “I...think so, it's...warm, like a heating lamp, right?”

“Yeah I feel it to,” Toby said "Nice and cozy,"

Claire stepped up to the wall, narrowing her gaze at the crystal beyond "I...I feel the warmth, but are any of you guys hearing a buzzing sound?"

“I think so,” Mary joined Claire at the wall “It’s like a gnat buzzing right?”

“No more like a dentist drill,”

Jim gaped at them. A heating lamp didn’t even come close, and if there was any kind of buzzing he couldn’t hear it.

“No human has ever gazed upon our hearthstone before,” Blinky spoke up causing all of them to turn in his direction, hanging a ways back from the wall with AAARRRGHH at his side “Perhaps human senses can not properly perceive it,”

Jim could have basked in the electrifying warmth of this hearthstone for hours, but he forced himself to step away from the wall and approach Blinky “What...what is this...hearthstone?”

Blinky tapped his chin thoughtfully, his three other arms folded behind his back “The hearthstone is many things, a great deal of which I am nowhere near qualified to explain. But what I can say is that the hearthstone is the lifeblood of Trollmarket, and the reason that every troll living here can flourish and thrive,”

Blinky grinned at him “And now, that includes you as well,”

"Hang on-- me?"

"Yes of course!" Blinky clapped a hand on Jim's shoulder and started leading him away, AAARRRGHH nudging the others along from behind them. The heat of the hearthstone crystal fading as they moved away.

"Hearthstone Trollmarket is now your home as well, and as the Trollhunter it shall be your duty to protect it,"

"Wait when you say protect--"

Abruptly a stack of boulders shoved Blinky away from him, cutting Jim off from the rest of the group. Two blinks and the boulders

became a troll. Taller and broader than Blinky but not as much as AAARRRGHH. They were entirely nude but their body was speckled with moss covered rocks of various size, the largest of which was perched atop his head.

The instant he realized the others were cut off Jim's adrenaline spiked. This guy was bigger, probably stronger, but there was a good chance Jim was quicker. If he moved fast enough maybe--

Before Jim could even think about darting away the strange rock covered troll threw out his arms and launched into a heated tirade in a deep, gravelly language Jim didn't recognize. He'd been going at it for a good thirty seconds when another voice shouted loudly from behind him in that same language, making Jim whirl around.

Another troll was stomping towards them, this one was smaller than boulder guy and nearly covered from head to toe in grass, numerous branches sprouting out of their back and their face twisted in a scowl.

Boulder guy scowled back and started shouting again, this time with a lot of accusatory pointing in grass guy's direction. Grass guy, now looking even angrier, was quick to start shouting and pointing back.

So looks like these guys were pissed at each other and not Jim or one of his friends.

Adrenaline draining away, Jim found himself in the bizarre position of being too baffled to be anxious, standing there glancing back and forth between the two trolls yelling at each other. Getting right up in each other's faces, so loud their shouts were almost closer to roars, even if Jim did understand the language he'd have a hard time understanding them--

Oh wait, they'd both stopped yelling and were staring at him now. Staring at him like they'd been expecting him to follow along with their shouted conversation and now wanted his opinion.

Jim actually felt his heart rate double.

Yep there was the anxiety, along with a double dose of adrenaline right on schedule.

Should he say something? These guys looked like they expected some kind of answer from him. But he had no idea what they'd been yelling about. The silence was going from awkward to bad, he needed to say something, anything, wait should he reply in english or try for whatever language they were speaking? But what if he messed it up and accidentally ended up insulting one of their mothers--

Blinky shoved himself in front of Jim, barking at the two trolls in the same gravelly language. Jim still had no idea what was being said, but based on Blinky's tone and the sheepish looks on boulder and grassy's faces they were getting a lecture.

Jim felt AAARRRRGGHH's snout on his back again, soft hands on his arms, glancing down to see Mary and Toby tugging him along, and allowed himself to be herded away.

After shouting at boulder and grassy for a few more seconds Blinky broke away and rushed to catch up with them.

"Apologies, apparently *some* trolls don't have the decency to spare our new Trollhunter from hearing out their petty squabbles on his first night in our market,"

Jim huffed out an awkward chuckle "Well thanks for stepping in, I had literally *no* idea what those guys were saying--"

Blinky stopped in his tracks and snapped around to stare at Jim, all six of his eyes focused on him.

"Great Gronka Mora! How could I have been so ignorant! Having spent your entire life on the surface of course you have no knowledge of trollish language-- or even larger culture!"

He scurried up close "I assure you, I will include lessons in trollish tongue and tribal diplomacy as part of your training,"

Jim could only blink back at him.

Language? Diplomacy? This was starting to sound a bit above his paygra--

"So about this training..." Claire came up to Blinky, eyes glinting with curiosity "You mentioned language and culture, but what other kind of training are we talking about here?"

Four of Blinky's eyes-- well blinked before his mouth stretched into a wide grin "Ah, I could certainly tell you what master Jim's training will entail, but I'd much rather *show* you,"

Blinky darted ahead, forcing the rest of them, AAARRRGHHH included, to run to catch up.

Fortunately Blinky seemed to be leading them away from the crowded city center, trading stall lined streets for bare stone corridors, leading them through one that was so narrow AAARRRGHH had to go single file behind the rest of them before the narrow opened up and they stepped out onto a wide--

Not for the first time tonight Jim froze in shock, taking in the sight in front of them. It wasn't impressive as the hearthstone, but it came pretty dang close.

A narrow stone causeway stretched out across a large canyon ahead of them, leading up to an absolutely massive amphitheater carved directly into the wall of bedrock beyond.

" *So. Freaking. Cool!* " Toby cheered as he raced ahead down the causeway

The sound that came out of Mary could only be described as a squeal, hurrying after Toby holding her phone this way and that "This is freaking amazing! I knew it was worth it to get a phone with an HD camera!"

Claire moved ahead more slowly, taking her time to survey the space around them as she crossed the canyon, an awestruck look on her face.

Still reeling but not wanting to let them get too far ahead, Jim picked up his feet and followed them onto the causeway. Hearing the soft patter of Darci's footsteps and the heavier thud of Blinky's just behind him, AAARRRGHH's own booming footsteps coming from even further back.

Darci peeked around cautiously "What...is this place?"

Blinky's smile was so wide it nearly split his face in two, throwing all four arms out wide as they stepped off the causeway into the amphitheater where Toby, Mary, and Claire were already running around excitedly "This young one, is the Heroes' Forge!"

Jim resisted the urge to immediately race off and start exploring, taking the time to survey his new surroundings. Up close he could see just how massive the space was, a couple dozen AAARRRGHHs could have milled around comfortably. What he'd first thought were decorative ridges carved up on the wall high above them actually appeared to be viewing platforms. There was a towering door with stairs leading up to it that looked like some kind of main entryway in the wall of the amphitheater directly across from the causeway. All around the edges the space was ringed by ridged columns. Instead of the bright crystal streetlights of the market, the space was lit by small but warmly glowing crystals embedded in the viewing rings and along the base of the columns. Jim was no Toby, but from what he knew about geology it looked like everything here, crystal lamps excluded, was made of the same kind of stone. Which meant that this whole amphitheater had probably been carved directly into the rock--

"Hey guys! Over here!"

Jim and the others hurried towards Mary where she was standing in front of one of the columns, phone angled sharply upwards "Check out these statues,"

They all looked up, seeing the column was topped by a large statue of a stocky troll wearing armor and holding a large sword up high--

"Wait..." Claire slowly turned from the statue towards Jim "Their armor, it looks like yours,"

"That's because it is,"

They all turned to see Blinky and AAARRRGHH walking up to them, AAARRRGHH just behind him.

"The Heroes' Forge is watched over by all those who've borne the amulet before,"

AAARRRGHH nodded along with him "Pred..oo...cess...ors,"

"Indeed," Blinky turned towards Jim and smiled, only this time it didn't fully reach his eyes, something melancholy behind his expression instead of his typical over the top enthusiasm.

"And one day, there shall be a statue of you here as well Master Jim,"

Jim slowly turned and gazed up at the statue with new eyes. Glancing around, he saw statues topping all the other columns as well. They were all various shapes and sizes, showing trolls that were tall and wiry to short and stocky and everything in between, but the one thing they had in common was armor strikingly similar to Jim's, all in various poses, some brandishing swords, some with—

"Hey is that one dabbing?" Toby pointed at one statue near the entryway.

Claire glanced up, scrutinizing the statue in question "Actually I think he's recoiling in horror,"

"This is the place for Trollhunters to train," Blinky swept his right two arms out "Broken and remade into warriors beneath the watchful gaze of Trollhunters past,"

"Actually that does bring me to something I've been wondering," Jim cut it "All this talk of training and protecting and stuff, but what exactly am I going to be training for exactly?"

"Why the protection of Trollmarket of course!" Blinky said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world and Jim was a blockhead for not knowing that.

"Oh..kay..." Darci stepped up to them "But protecting it from what?"

"Goblins, grusomes, the occasional rogue gnome," Blinky counted off his fingers.

"Gumm Gumms," AAARRRGHH added.

"Ah of course! The Trollhunter is responsible for safeguarding Trollmarket from the Gumm Gumms,"

"I'm probably going to regret asking this," Toby approached, all five of them gathered in front of Blinky now "But what's a Gumm Gumm?"

"Bad trolls," AAARRRGHH said solemnly.

"Quite right," Blinky nodded along "The Gumm Gumms are the scourge of the surface, a coalition of warlike tribes serving under their

king, surviving by stealing and plundering from other trolls,"

Mary snorted "You'd think they'd come up with a more intimidating name for themselves besides 'Gumm Gumms'"

"In common trollish the name translates to 'Bringers of horrible, slow, painful, and thoroughly calculated death,'"

Mary blinked back at him, eyes wide "Ok we're definitely going to have to sit in on language lessons sometime,"

Jim felt a lump drop in his gut "And I'm going to have to...fight these guys? Me against the bringers of horrible slow painful and thoroughly calculated death?"

"Well yes," Blinky held up a finger "But never fear, the Gumm Gumms were banished to the Darklands centuries ago, now only one remains,"

"Wait..." Toby said slowly "Was this the guy who chased us and tried to kill us the other night?"

"Yes, Bular the vicious, last of the Gumm Gumms, bane of Trollmarket,"

That...didn't make Jim feel better. He swallowed hard, trying to force back the sudden tightness in his stomach "So you mean I have to go up against him again?"

"Hey don't worry," Darci reached over and patted his arm "I'm sure

this Bular guy is just some meathead who's only half as tough as he thinks he is,"

"On the contrary, not only is Bular a master tactician in his own right, he's one of the deadliest warriors of his age," Blinky piped up.

"Very dangerous," AAARRRGHH said somberly "Fought many battles, don't underestimate,"

The twist in his gut exploded into full blow nausea. Jim swayed on his feet, pressing a hand to his stomach "I...I think I need to lay down,"

"Hang tight buddy I got you," Toby gripped him around the waist, the holding him upright, before glancing up at Blinky "So what my friend here would probably be saying if he wasn't busy freaking out is that he's a bit worried about going up against a guy that has over eight hundred pounds and a lot more experience on him,"

Blinky's smile dropped for a moment "Ah, I can see why that would be concerning," in an instant he brightened back up "But never fear, while Trollmarket is warded Bular cannot enter, allowing you to stay and complete your training in safety,"

"Ok...ok..." Jim ran a gauntleted hand through his hair, trying to regain his bearings, or at the very least not throw up "So how long do I have to stay here and train for until I stand a chance against this Bular guy?"

"Oh not long, just fifty years or so,"

All five of them stared at Blinky in dead silence.

"Hang on..." Claire said slowly "It almost sounded like you said Jim is going to have to stay down here for the next fifty years--"

"Oh yes I know it seems short, but we will work tirelessly to ensure your skill matches Bular's centuries of training after only a few decades,"

Mary sputtered "Wait-- centuries!?"

"D-- *decades* !?" Jim choked out.

Blinky seemed utterly oblivious, but AAARRRRGGHH had started to pick up on the tension, glancing back and forth between them and Blinky with an uneasy expression.

"I'm not staying down here for fifty years!"

"Never fear, Trollmarket shall be all too happy to provide you with food and shelter,"

"That's not-- my *home* is up there!" Jim jabbed a finger upwards "My house and my family and my school and everything!"

Blinky opened his mouth only to shut it immediately when AAARRRRGGHH put a hand on his shoulder and fixed him with a firm look.

Finally Blinky seemed to pick up on Jim's very obvious freak out.

"Well...perhaps if you are careful about concealing yourself and only travel during daylight hours you can come back and forth for your training,"

"But that still doesn't change the fact that apparently I'm going to have to *fight* this guy!"

"Never fear, with caution and proper planning we can avoid a confrontation with Bular, with any luck it should be decades before you have to face another troll in comb--"

"Well well well..."

They all turned to see a new troll come striding through the entryway, after a moment Jim recognized him as the spiky troll who'd been with Vendel and Blinky last night. He was smiling, but smiling in a way that reminded Jim of how Steve would look right before he shoved Eli into his locker.

"If it isn't the false Trollhunter himself," he stepped right up close, leaning down right in Jim's face, nose ring dangling only inches away.

Jim reflexively scrambled back, even through the armor he could feel his fur standing on end.

"Draal!" Blinky forced out a laugh and rushed between them, spreading his arms to create maximum distance "What brings you to the forge this fine evening?"

Spiky-- Draal's toothy grin got even wider "I wished to see for myself how this fleshbag brat is handling my father's legacy,"

Jim flinched but managed to hold his ground this time. There was no question what Draal meant but fleshbag, but what--

"Hang on did you say 'father'?" Claire scrambled forward, putting herself between Draal and Blinky "What does that mean?"

Something pained flashed on Blinky's face before he cleared his throat "Ah, well you see, the previous Trollhunter, Kanjigar the Courageous, was....ah....Draal's father,"

"My father was one of the greatest Trollhunters to bear the amulet," Draal hissed through gritted teeth, smile gone now "And after he fell the amulet should have gone to *me*. "

"Oh!" Darci piped up, peeking out from behind Jim "So the amulet is supposed to stay in certain families?"

Blinky had gone completely still, all six of his eyes darting around rapidly "Ah, well, you see...the amulet has no lineage of paternal inheritance. Though Draal is a warrior of unmatched strength so we suspected there was a strong possibility of..."

"But wait..." Toby turned towards Draal "If it was never a done deal that the amulet would go you why are you getting so butt hurt about it?"

If Draal was angry before he now looked profoundly pissed off. Without taking his eyes off of him, Jim slowly reached out and grasped Toby's shoulder, gently but firmly pulling him back until Jim was between him and Draal. He wished he could reach for Claire to, but she was too far away and he couldn't risk grabbing her without leaving the others exposed. The good thing was Draal was a lot more focused on Jim than her. A little voice in the back of his head was screaming at him to grab the others and run, but a much louder voice was shouting at him to not turn his back on Draal no matter what--

Then from out of nowhere, Draal smiled again.

"I thought I would come and offer the new Trollhunter my aid, as a *sparring* partner," he punctuated his sentence by pounding a fist into his hand with a boom of stone on stone, which did nothing to help Jim's nerves at all.

AAARRRRGGHH stepped up to him, shaking his head "Too soon, need more training,"

"AAARRRRGGHH is correct," Blinky's hurried up to Draal's other side, both of them flanking him now "While this is truly a...noble gesture on your part, perhaps we might wait until our master Jim is a bit more practiced--"

"In case you've forgotten Bular still prowls the surface," Draal whipped towards him with a snarl "Your *Trollhunter* doesn't have the luxury of time, and unless you're planning on fighting all of his battles for him it is best if his education begins *now*. "

Then, to Jim's horror, both Blinky and AAARRRRGGHH stepped back, faces grim, allowing Draal to stride past them. Flashing Jim a grin that was all teeth as he moved to the other side of the arena.

"Hang on..." for the first time tonight Mary lowered her phone and put it in her pocket "Jim's not actually going to have to fight this guy is he..."

"Draal right," AAARRRGHH rumbled "Bular not wait for Jim to learn, must start training now,"

Jim's heart froze, icy chill spreading out from his chest across his whole body.

"My lumbering companion is correct," Blinky started to shoo the four of them away from Jim and towards the side of the arena "Never fear, the Heroes' Forge is a scared space, Draal dare not sully it by dishonoring a spar through causing master Jim permanent bodily harm,"

Jim's heart started back up again only to zoom up into his throat beating overtime.

If that wasn't the exact fucking opposite of a vote of confidence Jim didn't know what was.

He scrambled up to Blinky "What do I do!?"

"Hold your own the best you can, remember to watch your footing and--"

"No seriously, what do I *do*!? I've never fought anyone before!"

Blinky looked down at him, one eyebrow-- ridge? raised "Never? But you clashed against Bular just last night and you were glorious!"

"That was blind panic and kitchen skills! I've never-- I don't know how to..."

Blinky winced in sympathy "Just...give it your best. The amulet chose you for a reason, I am certain the fight is within you. I promise that if you can land at least one hit, your life will be forever changed!"

Jim wasn't sure about that, more than that every cell in his body was screaming that this was a bad idea and he should have starting running in the other direction the second Draal showed up--

Toby raced around Blinky and planted himself in front of Jim "Well I'm not letting my best buddy go toe to toe with a rock monster on his own,"

Blinky frowned and reached towards him only to have Mary, Claire, and Darci rush around to flank him.

"Are you really going to let this guy just come barging in and call all the shots?" Darci said, hands on her hips.

"It doesn't sound like this guy has any formal authority outside of being pissed that the amulet chose Jim," Claire folded her arms in front of her "So he shouldn't get any say here,"

"Yeah aren't you guys Jim's official trainers?" Mary sniped "Tell this

Draal guy to fuck off,"

Blinky wrung both sets of hands in front of him, eyes refusing to focus on them, and when he spoke up his voice was low "As the Trollhunter, Jim is obligated to answer any honorable calling brought before him by a citizen of Trollmarket. If he so chose, Draal could make a case before Vendel that he is honor bound to test the new Trollhunter's capabilities,"

Jim's stomach gave a painful lurch, which combined with his already racing heart and frayed nerves did not feel great. He was really going to have to do this. He'd suspected that there'd be no squirming his way out of this, but hearing it out loud still made his guts twist themselves into a pretzel.

The one good thing here was that Draal seemed a lot more focused on Jim than his friends, so if worst came to worst he probably wouldn't go after them.

"Just...hang back with Blinky and AAARRRGHH guys,"

Toby, Darci, Mary, and Claire all pivoted on him in an instant.

Toby grabbed him by the arm "But Jim--"

"You heard him, this Draal guy isn't backing down without a fight, there's no getting out of this. And Blinky said he won't go too far here,"

If Jim said it enough times maybe he'd start to believe it himself.

Toby looked like he wanted to say more but Blinky put a hand on his shoulder "Master Jim is correct, come now let's move aside, he'll be better able to focus on his fight if he's assured of your safety,"

Moving with clear reluctance and shooting more than one nervous glance in Jim's direction, the four of them allowed Blinky to lead them to the side of the arena, a hand on each of their shoulders, tucking them in between one of the columns and AAARRRGHH's large form.

This was the last place he wanted to be, the absolute last thing he wanted to be doing. But knowing that the other four would be safe gave Jim the courage to squash the last remaining urge to head for the hills and pull the sword off his back, hesitantly holding it out in front of him. Staring across the arena towards Draal.

"So how does this work? Do we wait for a bell or--"

Draal bellowed out a roar, slamming his hands into the ground several times before rushing at Jim.

He swallowed hard, bracing himself, getting ready to jump out of the way--

Only for Draal to tuck himself into a ball and start *rolling* towards him with the speed and force of a cannonball. Jim yelped and leapt out of the way. A gust of air hitting him as Draal sped by, missing him by inches.

He whipped around, ready for Draal to turn and come zooming back, only he kept going. Rolling across the arena, *up* the side of the wall launching himself into the air. Unfurling midair, claspings his fists

together and raising them above his head, ready to bring them down as he rapidly descended--

Jim scrambled out of the way just as Draal landed with a deafening crash, knocking up a cloud of dust that cut off all visibility.

He whipped his head around, desperate to try and see where he was. Couldn't hear anything, heartbeat booming too loud--

Something slammed into him from the side. Knocking the air from his lungs and sending him flying back. He landed hard, one of his horns knocking against the ground, making him see stars. He'd lost his sword in the tumble, had no way of telling where it was, barely able to see clearly.

Arms and legs shaking, Jim desperately tried to scramble back upright, if only to be able to put some distance between him and Draal, managing to get to his feet just in time to see a massive fist come zooming at him.

This blow caught him in the stomach, instead of sending him flying it slammed him *down* into the stone floor, skidding a few feet before skidding to a stop with a wheeze. It *hurt*, his chest was aching inside the armor, throbbing where Draal's fist and the stone floor slammed into it, a sharp sting coming with each breath.

Jim had been tossed around before. Disoriented and had the breath knocked out of him. But this was the first time anything had ever really *hurt* him when he was like this.

The realization, stinging into him with each sharp breath, terrified him, losing all rational thought in a haze of pure terror.

He tried to scramble backwards to try and get away, but before he could even move so much as a foot a large hand swooped down, gripping around his chest and neck, painfully tight even with the armor.

He scrambled and flailed as Draal hauled him upright, faintly aware of the others shouting in the distance. Mind blank except for a burning desire to get *away*--

Only to freeze when he realized Draal was dangling him over the edge of the canyon.

In an instant Jim went from trying to squirm free to clinging to the hand that was crushing him. Heart pounding so hard he wouldn't be surprised if Draal could feel it. Hanging helpless like a worm on a hook, iron grip around his chest tightening.

The chestplate creaked in protest, pressure around his chest and neck going from agonizing to unbearable, so tight he couldn't even take a breath. His flailing taking on a new desperation as he struggled for air--

He was going to crush him, break his neck and snap his ribs, toss him down into the depths--

Draal snarled, pulling him in close, their faces less than an inch apart, so close Jim could actually *feel* the rumble of his growl.

"I've waited my entire life to inherit the amulet." he spat "I can wait for a sniveling two faced pretender like you to fall,"

He wound his arm up and threw Jim back into the arena, bouncing and rolling on the stone, lungs refilling with air only to have it instantly knocked out again. The hard impacts rattling him in his armor and sending bolts of pain through his already bruised chest and aching skull. Head spinning, ears ringing, and lungs rasping. Too disoriented to see clearly or even try to move.

Jim was faintly aware that he'd landed on his back. Frantic shouts getting steadily louder filled his ears. Blinking blearily, his vision swam before slowly clearing to see Toby, Mary, Claire, and Darci standing over him. Behind them he saw Draal's spiky back vanish as he headed up the stairs and stepped out of the arena.

"Jim!" Toby kneeled down by his head "Are you ok!?"

Still groggy, Jim managed to power through the dizziness and push himself upright, the action sending waves of dull pain through him, letting out a coarse groan as he raised himself up in spite of his battered body's protests.

"Y- yeah," he coughed, his voice was a lot hoarser than he would have liked "I'm fi--"

"Don't you dare say 'I'm fine'" Mary narrowed her eyes at him "We all saw what went down there,"

Jim winced, swaying a bit before propping himself up on his palms, Toby and Darci steadying him on either side "I...I think I've got some bruises, but nothing broken or bleeding,"

"Master Jim!" Blinky ran up to them, AAARRRGHH right behind him

"I know that must have been a...disheartening experience for you, but that was naught but your first spar,"

AAARRRGHH let out a rumble, reaching down with an open hand, Jim grabbed it and allowed the large troll to haul him up to his feet "No one fight good first time,"

"Quite right, I assure you you'll improve in time,"

"*Improve?* " Jim shoved AAARRRGHH's hand away "You saw what happened! That wasn't a fight, that was a beatdown!"

"That is unfortunate, but you are still young, with training and time your skill will increase,"

"Look it's not just that, all this training and the language and the troll stuff..." Jim gripped his head at the base of his aching horn "I...I don't think I'm cut out to be this...Trollhunter, if it's everything you say it is then that Draal guy should have been chosen, not me,"

Jim reached down and gripped the edge of the amulet, pulling it off his chest and tossing it to Blinky so he could hand it off to Draal and this place could have its real magical chosen one.

Or he would have if the stupid thing didn't refuse to budge, Jim pulling and tugging at it for an embarrassingly long time before giving up, huffing in frustration and letting his arms drop to his sides.

Blinky placed two hands on his shoulders, the other two clasped in front of him "I know things might seem dire now. But no Trollhunter is successful initially, in fact Unkar the Unfortunate lasted only six

hours as the Trollhunter before he was torn limb from limb,"

"Hang on this Unkar guy actually *died* on his first night!?" Mary shrieked.

"That can happen!?" Toby's eyes were practically bugging out "No four year terms or anything!? Your Troll-Batman can just straight up *die* at any time!?"

"Oh I, well uh...." Blinky was wringing both sets of hands now, all six eyes darting around "I meant only to say that master Jim has already exceeded his tenure, so if all else fails--"

"Yeah ok, we're done here," Jim stepped past him and started striding back towards the causeway, the others following shortly behind. It was time to get his mom and get out of here. He remembered enough that he could probably find the exit on his own--

Blinky jumped in front of him, forcing Jim to stop in his tracks "Master Jim *please* , a Trollhunter chosen by the amulet is never unchosen. While the amulet's choice may not make sense at the moment, I'm certain the machinations of fate are at play!"

Jim sidestepped him and kept going "Well fate can go find that Draal guy, he seems like he'd be interested,"

"I urge to to reconsider!" Blinky called out from behind him "The proof is in your nature! You who have been blessed to walk as both human and troll! Destiny was surely at work in the potion that changed you! Preparing you for the day you would be chosen to answer the amulet's call!"

Jim stopped dead and whipped around. Toby, Claire, Darci, and Mary all had deeply uncomfortable looks on their faces. Behind them Blinky was smiling at him hopefully, a stark contrast to the heavy blackness that had settled over Jim's mind. Only AAARRRGHH seemed to pick up on the tension.

Blessing.

Five years old screaming and crying clawing at the door. Countless nights locked up alone in his house. Weeks and weeks terrified that someone would break down the door and find out his secret.

Destiny.

His fath-- James laughing in Barbara's face.

In that instant he knew, he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt, Blinky had no idea what he was talking about.

"A blessing!?" Jim jerked a hand towards himself "Did you seriously just call *this* a *blessing*!?" the last word was nearly a bark.

Blinky flinched and staggered back into a worried looking AAARRRGHH "I-- I apologize, I only mean that such a gift--"

If Jim wasn't certain Blinky was full of it before he was now, snapping back around and striding onto the causeway "Come on guys, let's get out of here. This whole thing was a mistake,"

Jim waiting until he could hear four sets of soft human footsteps following him before he sped up to as fast as he could go without leaving them behind. Determined to get out of here, find a way to ditch the amulet, and leave this whole stupid Trollhunter thing behind.

Chapter End Notes

Jim's managed to suppress most of what he considers "unsavory" troll instincts, but the instinct to protect those in his social group smaller and weaker than him while they're in an unfamiliar place are coming in loud and clear.

One of the reasons I love Blinky so much as Jim's troll dad is because of how flawed he is. Sure he can't compare to Walter "Gray Morality Greorg" Strickler, but he's not perfect. He can be reckless and impulsive, in his eagerness to give Jim the best training possible he can get carried away, leading to Jim landing in tough situations (Blinky I love you but putting Jim in the fergalator was NOT a good plan).

Here he's so excited to gain not just one, but five new students, and dazzled by Jim's shapeshifting abilities; it goes over his head just how overwhelmed Jim feels and how his transformations have negatively affected a huge chunk of his life.

One thing I wanted to make clear while showing Jim and Draal's spar, is that while Jim might have a troll's natural strength and durability, he has none of the training and is hopelessly outmatched when it comes to more experienced trolls. The one and only reason he was able to walk away from his fight with Bular is because Bular wasn't taking their fight even remotely seriously. Troll form aside, Jim still has a lot of training to do.

Next time: Coming March 3, the kids head home and discuss how their first official visit to Trollmarket went down.

Chapter 12: Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Claire slowly eased the front door open and peeked inside. Seeing that the coast was clear she crept into the house as quietly as she could, gingerly shutting the door behind her so that it wouldn't make a sound.

“Claire, is that you?”

She flinched. Apparently not quiet enough. Her mom didn't sound upset, but Claire had been fooled before. In any case now that she'd called out to her the clock was ticking for Claire to respond before her mom got huffy one way or another. And she did *not* need to deal with more mom-rage right now. Claire quickly schooled her features into a neutral expression and strode into the kitchen before her mother could call out again.

The second she walked in Ophelia turned and arched an eyebrow at her “Is something wrong?”

Dang, her mom's sixth sense must be working overtime tonight. Fortunately she had a foolproof excuse. Claire deliberately flicked her eyes towards the ceiling “I just want to make sure I don't wake Enrique up from his nap,”

Perfect, not even technically a lie.

Ophelia flashed her a small smile “Oh, don't worry about that. He was having trouble settling down so your papa took him out for a drive,”

Claire didn't even have to fake the small sigh of relief that left her. Enrique was a very sweet, well behaved baby, but when his naps were interrupted they all paid for it.

Ophelia moved away from the pot on the stove she was stirring to pat her on the shoulder "Thank you for being so understanding when it comes to your brother's sleep schedule, it's a big help to have you do your studying outside the house,"

"Y- yeah, no problem,"

Studying...right...

Abruptly Ophelia's expression turned serious "You are still able to keep up with your schoolwork right? Your friends aren't too much of a distraction?"

Yep, there it was. The world could be burning down around them and her mom would still be worried about Claire keeping her grades up. Nevermind her solid 4.2 GPA.

"Enrique's getting better about his sleep schedule so if you need more time at home--"

Quick as a flash Claire pulled her science quiz from today out of her bag, where she had placed it near the top for this exact purpose. Handing it over to Ophelia with the 98% proudly displayed at the top.

"No need. We're all good at keeping each other on topic. If your

grades drop too low you'll get kicked off the play so we're all making sure to keep up with the studying,"

Ophelia gave the quiz a once over before giving a satisfied nod and handing it back to her "Good, but if you need any resources to help with your studying let me know. Remember your top priority right now is your grades,"

Claire forced a grin and nodded back "Got it,"

"Good, now I've put some clean laundry up in your room, do you mind sorting it while I finish getting dinner ready?"

Beyond grateful that her mom was giving her an out but desperate not to show it, Claire turned and headed towards the stairs "I'll get right on it,"

"Great, thanks Claire,"

As soon as her mom was out of sight Claire hurried up the stairs as fast as she dared. Darting into her bedroom taking care to shut the door gently, a soft exhale leaving her.

Finally, alone at last.

And just as Ophelia had said, there was a basket of clean laundry sitting on the foot of her bed.

Laundry wasn't anything Claire normally got excited about, still

wasn't, but right now she loved the idea of a nice, peaceful distracting task she could do with her hands. Setting her backpack down, she moved over and took a seat on the edge of her bed, grabbing a sock and its pair from the top of the basket and rolling them together—

The chiming of her phone startled her out of her task, pulling it out to see Mary's picture on the screen.

She tapped the screen and raised it to her ear “Hi Mare, what's up?”

“Hey Claire, you good to chat about our...study session from today?”

"Study session?"

"You know, our little....*underground* study group?"

Claire instantly went still, eyes darting towards her bedroom door before quickly switching from handset to headphones. Mary's voice from the phone wasn't *that* loud, but it never hurt to be extra careful, especially with her mom in the house “Am now,” she set her phone aside, picked up the dropped socks, and resumed rolling them “What did you want to go over?”

“Well for starters trolls are real, and not just on the ones on the internet,”

“Yeah, still getting used to that one,”

“I'm still getting used to a fact that there's a whole freaking city

underneath Arcadia that no one knows about!"

Claire huffed a laugh "Careful, don't let my mom know or she'll be down there passing out signs and trying to win over new voters,"

They both giggled at that.

"I know it's crazy enough with trolls being real and Jim being their magical chosen one..." there was a soft thump on the other line, Claire could practically see Mary flopping back on her bed "But I can't help but wonder what else is out there,"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean if trolls are real what other stuff is real to? Mermaids, werewolves, fairies, vampires..."

The corners of Claire's mouth twitched up in a grin "Don't tell me you're still hung up on getting a vampire boyfriend?"

"Tell anyone about that and I'll tell them about your witch phase,"

"Don't worry, I swore all three of us to absolute secrecy that one time we tried a new moon ritual," Claire said with a snicker "Remember?"

Claire's 'witch phase' as Mary described it, happened in seventh grade during the downswing of Mary's obsession with paranormal romance books and started when during a vacation to Seattle Claire had picked up a book on New Age Witchcraft from a used bookstore and instantly

fallen in love. That entire summer and a good chunk of the eighth grade she'd spent experimenting with DIY spells. Using crystals and herbs and runic circles drawn in the woods to make charms for good luck, potions for love, and once on Darci's behalf, to give the jerks going around smashing mailboxes a hefty dose of karma. While they'd never been as into it as she was, Darci and Mary had eagerly gone along with her experiments with spellcraft, Mary even documenting the whole process digitally. It came to an end when Claire was forced to realize that none of her so called 'spells' ever actually did anything.

Well that and her dad finding them etching out a pentagram in the backyard while wearing flower crowns. Nevermind that the pentagram was a symbol for protection and heather brought luck. A lot of shouting and a frantic phone call to her abuela later and Claire was officially banned from experimenting with magic.

"And don't you forget it it," Mary fired back "But if other things are real to, where are they? Trolls live in the underground troll city, but what if other things are up here hiding in plain sight? What if there's a whole bunch of magical creatures living here in Arcadia right under our noses?"

She froze, a prickle of unease crawling up her back. Without thinking Claire's eyes darted towards the windows. The night outside was a solid black, blinded by the light from her room, but just because she couldn't see out didn't mean something else couldn't see in...

A knot formed in her stomach, setting the laundry aside, Claire stood and strode across the room to pull the curtains shut. Tension in her belly unwinding, but only partially, as the connection to the outside world was cut off "Well....we can add that to the list of things to ask Blinky about,"

Mary belted out a sharp laugh "Hah! Girl I've got two lists going already,"

"Two?" Claire said, retaking her seat and selecting a large towel to fold
"Why two?"

"First one is stuff we're going to ask Blinky, second one is stuff I need to do, mainly try to find troll-proof phone models and help Dr. Lake figure out how to add them to her family plan...and maybe figure out a way to get Draal the Dickhead to back off, or at the very least help Dr. Lake keep her blood pressure down,"

Claire couldn't help but flinch at that, setting the folded towel aside and selecting another pair of socks.

When Jim's mom had learned what had happened with Draal she was *mad* . So mad she'd made the five of them wait under the bridge while she went back underground to yell at Vendel. Normally Claire would have rankled at being told to sit and wait outside while the adults discussed things, but in this case her desire to escape the potential blast radius overrode any urge to be a part of the conversation. Warily watching the still seething Dr. Lake when she came back out twenty minutes later, radiating so much fury Claire had been reluctant to get back in the car with her lest she catch some of the residual.

During the drive back to town Dr. Lake had told them, or more accurately hissed through gritted teeth while she kept the steering wheel in a stranglehold, that Draal shouldn't go after Jim any more, but if he did they needed to tell her immediately. Not Vendel, not Blinky, not AAARRRRGGHH, *her*.

"Yeah Dr. Lake could definitely use a spa day, or six,"

"Tell you what," Mary said crisply from the other side of the line "If it does come up I will graciously allow her first crack at the eligible

vampire bachelors slash bachelorettes we find,"

Hearty laughter burst out of Claire, from the other end of the line she could hear Mary's loud cackling. The two of them howling and shrieking with laughter.

Minutes later they were still fighting back giggles, but Mary's crack had stirred up something that had been swimming in the back of Claire's mind for days.

"So if magical creatures of all kinds are real, including potentially romantically available vampires..." she lowered her voice "What about...magic?"

"Pssh, Claire we've known that's real for months,"

"No we've known about Jim's shapeshifting for months, but finding the amulet changes things,"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, that if Jim's amulet came from Merlin, the same guy from our history books, that means Merlin had actual *real* magic, and it wasn't just stories or exaggerations, so what if other ordinary people can learn magic to?"

For a few seconds stunned silence echoed through her headphones, then Mary let out a low whistle "...holy shit C-bomb, you're right,"

"I mean did Merlin learn magic, or was he born with it? I mean like Gandalf looks human but he's a quasidemigod," Claire knew she was rambling, fabric flying under her fingers, but couldn't stop the excitement from bubbling out "So does someone have to be born with magic or can anyone...pick it up? And is magic inherent or does it require wands or staffs or--"

A snort from Mary cut her off "Dang, your witch phase never really ended, did it?"

"Mare--"

"I know I know, you're right, if we can figure out how to turn boys into frogs by wiggling our fingers that's worth investigating, but maybe give it a little while before you hit the trolls with the Hogwarts speech,"

"Why? The sooner we figure out what we're dealing with the better,"

"I think it might be a little...much, for Jim,"

Claire froze, pillowcase hanging half folded from her arm. The giddiness welling up inside her popping like a bubble, leaving her empty and sober "Oh...yeah, you're right. I know he's going through a lot right now,"

Aside from getting his ass kicked by Draal, it was clear that this whole 'Magical Destiny' thing was weighing on Jim. Again aside from the whole ass kicking thing, and which was more than enough.

"Don't worry, as soon as Jim figures things out and we deal with Draal

the dickhead I'll help you bug the trolls into giving us magic lessons,"

"Thanks, you're the best,"

"And don't you forget it Claire-bear,"

"Which is why I know you're not going to show the trolls the pictures from the rituals I tried in middle school,"

"Your secret's safe with me, as long as you keep quiet about that cringe fanblog I made after the movie came out,"

A faint smattering of Mandarin echoed in from the line, Mary shouted a stream of Mandarin back before switching to english "I gotta go now, see you at school, and let me know if any owls show up with letters,"

Claire rolled her eyes but she was still smiling "Will do, see you tomorrow,"

Claire disconnected the call and pulled out her headphones. Reaching over for the next piece of laundry only grab air. Glancing to the side she saw the bin was empty, a glance back to her right reveal a pile of neatly folded laundry sitting next to her on the bed.

With nothing to occupy her hands or her mind, Claire found herself sitting in the only semi comfortable silence of the house, thoughts stirred up by her conversation with Mary, thoughts about magic and Jim and what this meant for all of them, swirling and mingling with other things she hadn't allowed herself to think about in months...

Jim letting out a laugh, lips pulled back in a grin giving the cutest peek at his fangs

Claire gave her head a sharp shake.

Nope nope nope. She wasn't going to dwell on that right now. She wasn't one of the dopey heroines in the paranormal romance books Mary loved. She was a tough self motivated young woman. As soon as it was polite to do so, she was going to bug Blinky for answers on how magic worked, get her own wand, and become a badass sorceress. What she *wasn't* going to do was spend all her time mooning over Jim.

Even if armor was a really good look for him...

Claire jumped to her feet and hurried out of her bedroom and back downstairs. Forcing down the heat swelling up in her cheeks. She'd go help her mom with dinner. Her mom would no doubt ask more prying, needling questions about her school work, but fending off those was better than dwelling on *that* any day of the week.

Chapter End Notes

Shorter chapter this time, but important for establishing what's going on with some of the other kiddos.

And Jlaire is endgame for this story, but by golly I'm going to make these awkward teenage babies WORK for it!

Coming March 31: Jim gets some unfortunate news and heads back to Trollmarket for his second round of training.

Chapter 13: Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Jim? Do you have a moment to talk?”

Jim started and popped his head out of the closet, seeing Ms. Janeth standing in the hall a ways behind him “Oh, sure, be right there,” he stood and headed in her direction, still carrying the cans of paint he’d been sent to retrieve.

Ms. Janeth’s gaze was soft in a way that had become uncomfortably familiar over the course of his freshman year “I just wanted to let you know that Steve Palchuk will also be participating in the play,”

It was only through sheer force of will that Jim managed to lose his grip on the paint cans. His intestines in knots in an instant.

Ok, this was objectively better than being asked if he was having 'trouble at home', but still *not* something that he wanted to hear.

“He’s playing the part of Romeo,” Ms. Janeth continued “And his schedule is set up so he’ll only arrive on set after you’ve left for the day,” she peered down at him “Are you...comfortable with this arrangement?”

“I_”

I’m totally fine, don’t worry about it.

Jim shut his mouth with a click. Honestly he'd been doing his best to not think about Steve for the last six months, and had been doing a great job of avoiding him. He still wasn't sure what exactly he thought of Steve. The guy earned the nickname 'Psycho Steve' for a reason, and had been the source of many headaches, mainly from noogies, ever since middle school. Heck, Steve was the reason he had to spend a week and a half taking all of his meals through a straw.

But even if Steve was the biggest jerk on the planet, what Jim said to him...

Maybe the real reason your dad left was because he finally figured out how much of a loser you really--

Guilt surged to life in the bottom of his stomach.

No one deserved that, not even Steve.

Untangling exactly how he felt about Steve was going to take time and a lot more sessions with Kurt, but Ms. Janeth was staring at him and that worried crease between her eyes was getting deeper, better say something. Something that wouldn't come around to bite him in the ass if his mouth wrote checks his big dumb emotions couldn't cash.

"I...think I'm ok with that. As long as we don't have to interact too much,"

Ms. Janeth did her best to conceal it but her massive relief was obvious, that was clearly the answer she was hoping to hear "Thank you for being so accommodating, but if Steve does do anything to make you uncomfortable come to me right away. The theater is for

everyone, and I won't have anyone making another student uncomfortable,"

"Got it," Jim started backing away, eager to escape this conversation and the things it was making him think about "Thanks Ms. Janeth,"

He hurried towards the set piece Toby and Darci were already painting. Scattered around the gymnasium were other stage hands working on other props and set pieces in various stages of completion. Mary and Claire weren't here, they and all the other actors were spending today in the auditorium going over their lines.

Toby saw him approaching and perked up "Bout time you showed up, we almost ran out of..." he his gaze flickered down to the near empty paint can "'Timid Absinthe', what took you so long?"

Jim dropped to his knees and started prying open one of the cans "Ms. Janeth wanted to talk, she said Steve's joining the play, he'll come in after I leave for the day,"

Toby stiffened before slowly returning back to the set piece and raising his paintbrush "Ah...bummer,"

"Well at least we won't have to deal with him a lot," Darci piped up.

Jim dipped his brush and aggressively started smearing the pale green paint on the wood "Yeah," he forced his voice to stay light "It shouldn't be a problem,"

Twenty minutes of blissfully boring set work and a can and a half of paint later Jim's phone went off. He pulled it and silenced the alarm,

glancing out a window with a wince. Still bright out, would be for hours, be he had to stick to a schedule that would still work in December.

“Alright guys, it’s my time,”

Darci set aside her paintbrush and stood up “You’re going... underground, right?”

Jim grimaced “Yep...sure am,”

He really wished his mom hadn’t promised that Vendel guy he’d go there every day after school for at least an hour, and given the trolls a watch to mark the time. Part of him wanted just to call the whole thing off, return the stupid amulet that refused to leave his person. But he hadn’t figured out a way to do that without having several conversations that he *really* didn’t want to have.

So here he was, heading back to the magical underground troll city, probably to get his ass kick by another angry troll.

Toby shot upright and tossed his paintbrush on the drop cloth “Count me in,”

“Me to,”

His heart clenched “No, guys...you don’t have to leave with me, I don’t mind if you stay and work on the play with the rest of—”

Toby stepped forward and put a hand on his shoulder “Jim, I’m ride or die with you every step of the way, magical chosen one or no. But me being an awesome supportive friend aside, if you ask me to choose between Shakespeare and a magical underground city, I’m going to pick the magic city,”

Jim glanced up at Darci “And you—”

“You heard what Toby said. Magic. City.” she pulled her phone out and started tapping at the screen “I’ll let Claire and Mary know so they can meet us down there later,”

A short while later the three of them were on their bikes heading towards the canals, and all too soon they were under the all too familiar bridge. The second he hopped off his bike Jim felt the rattling in his pocket.

He pressed his hand to his jeans, feeling the amulet quivering through the denim, trying to hold it in place.

Just stay in there, stay still--

With a resounding click the amulet shot through his grip, out of his pocket, and slammed into his chest, armor materializing around it in a bright flash.

The sinking feeling in Jim's gut tripled.

Toby stopped and turned towards him “Hey how come you always put the armor on before we go to Trollmarket?”

Jim fought to keep his expression neutral, of course Toby would notice "Just makes it easier to keep track of the amulet," he forced a grin and rapped his knuckles on the breast plate just to the right of the amulet, letting out a metallic ringing sound "See? Not going anywhere,"

"But doesn't it teleport back to you?"

Jim bit back a scream, could Toby not be perceptive for five freaking minutes!?

"Well yeah, but not when someone takes it, I'm still not sure how all that works, but better safe than sorry,"

Darci peered up at the amulet quizzically "Maybe we can ask Blinky about it today,"

Jim hoped his smile didn't look as awkward as it felt "Yeah..."

Exactly at the allotted time a glowing arch lit up in the canal wall in front of them. The concrete falling away to reveal AAARRRGHHH standing behind it.

"Sup dude," Toby lead his bike inside, Darci and Jim following with their bikes just behind him. Jim shuddered as the change swept over him, armor growing and shifting to accommodate. The glow from the sun bouncing off the concrete still shining in the corners of his eyes.

It still felt weird to change during the day.

“So what’s the game plan for today?” Toby sided up to the large troll, eyes glinting with excitement “Combat training? Quest for forbidden treasure?”

AAARRRGHH let out a soft rumble, turning and heading towards the stairs “Library, Blinky waiting,”

Darci giggled “Magical library, sounds fun,”

Stashing their bikes near the entrance, they followed after AAARRRGHH as he headed down the stairs. Jim's stomach working itself into tighter and tighter knots with each step he hopped down.

He wasn't looking forward to the inevitable repeat of his epic ass kicking yesterday. Mom might have said Draal shouldn't bother them any more, but Jim knew that guys like Draal weren't scared off that easily.

And even if Draal didn't show up today he was probably going to get more lectures from Blinky about 'destiny' and 'duty' and how Jim's fucked up life was all part of some grand mystical plan....

His intestines twisted again. Jim wondered if it was possible to throw up as a troll. He'd never done it before, but this seemed to be the week of unfortunate discoveries.

Fortunately for Jim's steadily simmering anxiety they got relatively few looks from trolls as they navigated the winding stone streets. AAARRRGHH turning into a small, well relative to AAARRRGHH's size, leading them through a short tunnel into a larger room.

In an instant Jim knew this was a library, cultural differences between humans and trolls aside, there was no way this could be anything but. Thick shelves lined the walls, absolutely brimming with books, more heaped in stacks on various desks scattered around the space. Where they wouldn't fit on the shelves or desks more books were piled in stacks on the floor. The space lit by warmly glowing crystal lanterns squeezed in between the books.

With a grinning Blinky standing there waiting for them in the thick of the books.

“Welcome young pupils. Today we begin with the most important step in every Trollhunter’s journey,”

Toby's eyes sparkled “Blood magic?”

Blinky threw all four arms out “History!”

He grabbed a book off the nearest table and thrust it into Toby’s arms, Toby nearly crumpling under the weight of it. Knees buckling and eyes bugging out.

“All Trollhunters must be well versed in the knowledge of those that came before. In addition, we must start teaching you basic trollish, for if you are to speak for trolls you must first be able to speak *with* trolls,”

Blinky moved to the left and dropped another book, clearly not made with human muscles in mind, in Darci’s arms, Darci staggering and letting out a wheeze as she struggled to hold it up.

“And as the Trollhunter’s companions, you must be just as learned as he, if not more so!”

Jim snapped his gaze back and forth, wondering which one of them he should try and help first--

"I'll leave AAARRRGHH to supervise the beginnings of your studies while Master Jim and I share a quick word,,"

AAARRRGHH lumbered forward, plucking the books from Toby and Darci's arms, sending them popping back upright and gasping with relief, nudging Jim in Blinky's direction with his shoulder.

Sending one more glance towards Darci and Toby--

They were fine they were safe here, AAARRRGHH could protect them

Jim slumped and allowed Blinky to lead him away "Lucky me," he mumbled, Blinky leading him away through a side door into a smaller room. Given that this whole place was a library this was probably a study room. Lit by a single glowing crystal on top of a desk absolutely piled with books.

He bit back a heavy sigh, time to get this lecture about how he wasn't appreciative enough of his shitty destiny over with. The sooner this was all done the sooner he could go ho--

“I’m sorry,”

Jim did a double take, shock pulling him out of his own head to *really* look at Blinky for the first time today. There wasn't any of the bounding enthusiasm he'd gotten used to, instead Blinky was wringing both sets of hands, face twisted with guilt.

"I was so dazzled by your ability to walk in two worlds I neglected to consider just how difficult your condition must make things for you," his voice was soft, all six of his eyes focused on Jim "It could not have been easy for a young troll to grow up surrounded by humans,"

Jim was at a loss for words, something hot and fluttery bursting to life in his stomach alongside the anxiety already coiled in his gut "Oh...um...it's ok, you couldn't have known--"

"Ignorance is no excuse for being oblivious." Blinky straightened, a determined edge creeping into his voice "If I am to be your mentor it is my duty to accommodate myself to your needs,"

Blinky took another half a step towards him "I know your spar with Draal was...disheartening, but your training has only begun, you will improve. And no matter how daunting it may be you will always have myself, AAARRRGHH, and your faithful companions by your side, ready to aid with anything you may need,"

Even though he was in an underground troll library, talking to a troll while looking like a troll, all of a sudden he heard Mr. Strickler's voice in his head.

In the myth Atlas alone bore the weight of the entire world on his shoulders, but Jim, you aren't Atlas. However heavy your burden is, you don't have to bear it alone.

His breath hitched "I...I think I need some of that help now,"

In an instant Blinky pulled the chair out from the desk, gesturing for Jim to sit down.

Jim practically collapsed into the seat, Blinky dropping to a knee in front of him "What troubles you?"

"Well Draal to start with..."

Blinky winced "I am sorry you had to go through that. Draal...did not conduct himself well that day. Vendel told him as much, he will not try that again. But please keep in mind that Draal is an accomplished warrior with centuries of training, whereas you are an unblooded stripling. It is no shock that he bested you, and the only shame that transpired was on Draal's side,"

"It's not just...more than that all of *this*," Jim gestured vaguely around them "Is too much!"

Blinky's expression became pinched in a way Jim couldn't read, two eyes darting around nervously while the other four focused on Jim "Master Jim could you...elaborate?"

Jim tangled his hands in his hair and let out a loud groan that quickly turned into something closer into a growl "You say I'm some magical guardian but that's not who I am! Draal beat the crap out of me, Bular nearly killed me-- how can I protect a whole city when I'm just one person!? I can't even speak the language! I--" his voice cracked "If the Trollhunter is everything you say it is, I'm not cut out for it. And I'm-- I'm *terrified* I'm going to screw this up and this whole 'Trollhunter' thing is going to explode in my face and someone is going to get hurt because I couldn't cut it! I think...I think the amulet made a mistake..."

Strained silence filled the space, Blinky staring at him with an unreadable expression for longest time. Then he cleared his throat and spoke up in a soft voice.

"I know this might be difficult to believe, but the amulet does *not* make mistakes. It's choice may not make sense at the moment, but I assure you there was a *reason* you were chosen above all others,"

Jim managed to raise his head enough to look Blinky in the eye.

"And I can assure you," Blinky stepped forward and placed two hands on each of his shoulders "Whatever your fate may be, you do not have to face it alone. AAARRRGHH and I are here to guide you in whatever way you may need. And not just the two of us, you are part of Trollmarket now, and we look after our own,"

Jim's chest got looser and tighter at the same time "Including Draal?" he snapped before he could stop himself.

Blinky flinched back with a wince, guilt instantly replacing the bitterness welling up inside him.

"Sorry sorry, that wasn't-- I just--" Jim dropped his head into his hands with a groan "This whole...'destined to be a hero' thing, it's just-- it's just not me..."

Silence fell between them again.

"Master Jim, if I may..." Blinky spoke up in a quiet voice "Destiny is a

gift. Some go their entire lives living existences of quiet desperation, never learning the truth that what feels as though a burden pushing down upon our shoulders is actually a sense of purpose that lifts us to greater heights. Never forget that fear is but the precursor to valor, that to strive and triumph in the face of fear is what it means to be a hero."

Jim peeked up to see Blinky beaming at him.

"Don't think, Master Jim. Become."

For a few moments Jim could only stare at Blinky in surprise, hand drifting to the amulet in his chest. He didn't feel...all better, not by a long shot, but for the first time in a long time this whole 'magical hero' thing seemed a little less scary.

"I don't know how to control the armor," he blurted out "It jumps on to me whenever I come down here and after I go home it takes hours to pry off,"

Blinky's face dropped, eyes shifting all around "Ah, I see. While the armor is traditionally summoned by reciting the incantation, the amulet also responds to the bearer's emotional state. Summoning the armor when you are in distress, and dismissing it when you are at ease. It will take time, but you should be able to gain better control of it as you become accustomed to it,"

Jim sagged in his seat, letting out a gusty exhale.

There it was, the thing that had been weighing on his mind like a sack of rocks for days, gone in an instant.

"Thanks Blinky,"

Blinky's mouth twitched up into a grin "As I said, AAARRRGHH and I are here to assist you with anything you might need as you learn to embrace your new mantle,"

Without warning Blinky plucked a book off the desk and dropped it in Jim's arms in one fluid motion.

"For now we can start with basic grammar,"

A weak chuckle escaped Jim as he stood, book in hand "Sounds good,"

Chapter End Notes

Alternate title: Blinky completes another stage in his evolution into full fledged troll dad.

I've said it before, a big part of the reason I love Blinky is because he's far from perfect, especially early in the series. He can get carried away and let his own impulsiveness get the better of him, leading to a bad situation. But no matter how things go pear shaped, everything he does is with the intention to help Jim and his other students. And when he does go too far he's the first to try and make things right. Blinky might not be a perfect person, but he's an amazing dad.

Blinky's interactions with Jim are slightly different than canon here, that's because Blinky's treating Jim like a young troll instead of a human of indeterminate age (in canon Blinky knew that humans are comparatively short lived, but there's no indication he was ever aware of just how young 16 is for a human). Blinky is fully aware that Jim was born a human, raised and spent a good chunk of his life as one, but when he sees Jim he can't help but subconsciously treat him like he'd treat a normal, non-shapeshifting young troll.

Coming April 28th: A troll wonders just how his life has come to

this while drowning his sorrows at the local tavern (spoiler alert it's Draal).

Chapter 14: Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"We're here!"

Blinky turned to see AAARRRGHH leading the other two humans in Master Jim's party into the library. Master Jim along with the stout human and the dark skinned one--

Toby Grandson of Nana and Darci Daughter of Louis and Amaryllis

Perking up at the sight.

"Welcome to my humble library," Blinky stepped up towards the newcomers, herding them in towards the table where their companions waited "I apologize, but in the chaos of our initial and subsequent meetings I neglected to receive your names,"

"No problem," the one with the longest hair, hanging halfway down to their waist, spoke up "I'm Mary,"

"And I'm Claire,"

Blinky twiddled both sets of thumbs, gaze darting between the two of them "And your...parentage?"

The two new humans shared a look that Blinky, unfamiliar as he was

with humans and their mannerisms, wasn't able to place.

"He wants to know who your parents are," Master Jim called out from behind them "Son of, daughter of, that thing,"

Mary and Claire's eyes widened, each letting out a soft 'Ohh'.

"Well I'm Mary, daughter of Amy and Julie,"

Blinky gave her a nod of acknowledgement.

Mary, the human with the longest hair is named Mary, daughter of Amy and Julie

"I'm Claire, daughter of Ophelia and Javier,"

Blinky turned and nodded in her direction as well.

Claire, daughter of Ophelia and Javier, a streak of blue in her hair.

"Come then, young Claire and Mary, your companions have been awaiting your arrival,"

"Hey guys," Darci shut volume 23 of A Brief Recapitulation of Troll Lore and got to her feet "We were just having language lessons,"

"Common trollish is wild stuff," Toby stood as well "A lot of pronouncing things from the diaphragm,"

Blinky felt the corners of his mouth twitch upwards at that. Watching Toby and Darci attempt to recreate the deep guttural syllables of trollish in their sharp human voices had been equal parts admirable and endearing.

AAARRGGHH hummed in agreement "Speak from nose, but getting better,"

Master Jim remained seated but pivoted in his chair to face them better "Blinky's actually been working on a Trollish to English dictionary, we can't take it home with us, but I got some great pictures," he pulled out his small cellular device, the others all gathering in close to observe as he tapped at the tiny, delicate device with surprising ease--

Perhaps not so surprising, Master Jim was human himself after all

The thought gave him pause. Of course Blinky was completely *aware* that Master Jim was just as human as his companions, only adopting the form of the troll at specific times. Master Jim had told them himself, and Vendel had relayed much of the details surrounding his transformation that Bah buh rah herself had told him.

Still, when he saw Jim crouched over tomes in his library, grinning up at him with blunted tusks, face alight with youthful enthusiasm, he couldn't help but imagine him as any one of Trollmarket's striplings.

What would his life had been like had he been discovered earlier, would Bah buh rah have permitted him to be raised in Trollmarket? Would he have grown to maturity wandering these halls and learning trollish from

Blinky's tomes?

Blinky shook his head to dispel the fantasy, he couldn't let his biases color his mentorship. Jim had been raised as a human, not a troll, and Blinky needed to remember as such. Furthermore the other humans weren't just his companions, they were his compatriots, his comrades in arms. Furthermore while that hadn't explicitly claimed as such, Blinky would bet his entire supply of barter metal that they were nestmates as well.

Therefore Blinky needed to ensure all five of them shared in the same education of all things trollish, else he could not claim to be any respectable mentor at all.

"I will go over the linguistic differences between our languages in depth later," Blinky shooed them with all four limbs, gesturing for them to retake their seats "Now that all of you are present, we can go over the three rules,"

Toby raised one of the tufts of hair over his eyes.

A common human expression of surprise or disbelief

"Three rules?"

"Three," AAARRRGHH nodded, expression solemn, holding up three fingers "Very important,"

"My mountainous companion is correct. The Trollhunter lives and *dies*, by three basic rules. Rule number one!"

Blinky leaned over towards his students, willing all six of his eyes to focus on each of them in turn "Always be afraid,"

Claire blinked up at him "Always be afraid? That seems counterproductive,"

"On the contrary, fear is good! Keeps us alert, Keeps us on guard. Makes us vigilant!" he shifted half of his eyes to look at Jim directly, raising a finger to point at him while keeping his three other limbs folded behind his back "A hero is not he who is fearless, but he who is not *stopped* by it,"

Master Jim nodded briskly "Got it, be afraid, I think I can manage that,"

Toby snorted "Yeah, somehow,"

Jim shot a look at Toby Blinky couldn't interpret, but nevertheless, he pressed on.

"Two, always finish the fight, an opponent must be given no mercy," he smacked his fist against his open palm using his topmost arms.

Darci bit her lip and let out a sharp hum "Seems a little...harsh,"

"Ours is an unforgiving world," Blinky kept his tone firm "With no space for mercy for your foes, hence the third rule," he raised three fingers "When in doubt, always kick them in the gronknuks,"

"Ok I know I'm probably going to regret asking this," Master Jim shifted in his seat "But what are gronknuks?"

Blinky grabbed A Brief Recapitulation of Troll Lore Volume 39 off the shelf, opened it to the illustration of Maddrux's heroic defeat of Orlagk at Glastonbury Tor, and placed it on the table before his pupils.

As one they all leaned in with curious glances, then recoiled back with hisses and winces.

AAARRRGHH shuddered "The horror..."

"Yeah, harsh," Toby said with a grimace.

"Wait," Mary turned towards Blinky, eyes wide "You're telling me that one third of being the trolls' super magical girl is kicking people in the balls?"

"This is kind of making me doubt all three rules as a whole," Master Jim mumbled.

"These rules have saved many a Trollhunter's very lives," Blinky placed his topmost hands on the edge of the table and fixed each of the five of them with a stern gaze in turn, doing his best to mimic Vendel's stately authority "Remember them, embody them, for you are now part of a sacred lineage stretching millennium across countless-- Mary why are you elevating your arm?"

Mary dropped her appendage back down "I'm sure this is all very

important and sacred and great power comes with great responsibility and all that, buuuuut can we go check out the market?"

Blinky stared back at her "'Check out' the market?"

"I mean this whole place is called Trollmarket right? That means there's market here, with people buying and selling stuff. I was wondering if we could go...take a look?"

Claire turned towards her, expression flat "Mare."

"What? Back in Arcadia the only malls worth going to are forty minutes away by car and now you're telling me there's a magical one right under our feet? Course I want to take a look,"

"Not gonna lie, I'm also pretty curious," Toby added.

Darci shrugged "I could check out a magic mall,"

"How about it Blinky?" Master Jim flashed him a nervous grin "Can we...put the books on hold for now?"

Blinky sputtered. Put the books on *hold*!? They had barely scratched the surface of A Brief Recapitulation and had only gone over the basic nouns of common trollish! And these striplings wanted to run off and--

A rumble and a puff of air on the back of his head had Blinky looking up to where AAARRRGHH was smiling down from directly above him.

"Maybe humans learn more by seeing, not reading,"

A rush of warmth filled Blinky's chest, he had to fight to keep a stern look on his face while he appraised his pupils.

"Very well," he reached over and shut Volume 39 "Perhaps the best way for you youngsters to learn of troll culture, is to experience it first hand,"

Draal glared at the tankard of ale as if it had personally insulted his father, mother, and the entirety of his ancestors. Letting out a low growl, he lifted his head to flick his gaze from side to side. He sat alone at his table, a glaringly open space in the crowded tavern. Usually Draal had no shortage of trolls willing to share a pint and knock heads, but now everyone in the tavern gave him a wide berth, none even daring to look his way.

Something that Draal would normally take a small measure of pride in, now he would have given anything to blow off steam by knocking horns with someone.

Then again he felt like tearing the head off the next troll that glanced at him oddly, so he couldn't truly fault the other patrons for acting in self preservation.

The logic behind their actions somehow made him angrier.

He snatched up the tankard and started gulping down the contents as fast as his lungs would allow. Only barely registering the pleasant taste. Warmth filling his gut and adding to the existing hum in his skull .

Good ale no doubt, not nearly as strong as the mead he preferred, but mead was meant to be savored not chugged. And some deep down nagging voice in Draal's head that sounded annoyingly like Vendel told him that he didn't need a great deal of alcohol clouding his mind and fueling any poor decisions.

But not even the best mead in the market would do anything to abate the blistering rage that had been simmering in his gut for days.

The amulet had chosen a human. Worse than that, the amulet had chosen a human twisted by dark magics into the shape of a troll. Not a changeling, thank Gorgus for that, Draal didn't know if he'd be able to control himself if an impure got their grubby hands on his father's amulet.

Still, far too close for comfort.

Draal slammed the now empty tankard down on the table, dragging the back of his arm across his mouth to wipe away the foam.

The worst part of this whole thing was he couldn't rage about the new hunter's true fleshling nature with anyone that didn't already know about it, and Vendel had already made his opinions on Draal's ragings quite clear.

A flicker of shame rose up past the anger, Draal quickly smothered it

and sank back into his rage.

If Trollmarket learned that the amulet had chosen a human, twisted and rotted with foul magics into an obscene mockery of a troll. Not only would the entire market panic, but they would lose faith in the legacy of the Trollhunters, his *father's* legacy.

No. As much as the false hunter rankled him Draal couldn't allow that to happen.

But none of Vendel's logic, Blinky's reasoning, or even Draal's own conscience did anything to abate the boiling fury in his gut.

He opened his mouth to call for another tankard only to have a new scent, infuriating in how quickly it was becoming familiar , followed seconds later by the sound of shrill, chirping voices.

Draal didn't even try to disguise his scowl as he turned to glare out the tavern's entrance.

A pair of humans scurried through the market following after Blinky, excitedly pointing at various things and asking questions. To which Blinky happily answered each and every one.

Of course, this must be a dream come true for the eccentric scholar.

But what really had him gnashing his tusks was seeing the figure– the one that looked like a troll but wasn't, trailing after, two more humans on either side of him.

He wore an easy smile, one that set Draal's teeth on edge, wrapped in that aching familiar armor--

As if he had any right to wear it

He felt his fist tighten around his tankard, the wood creaking in protest.

One of the humans next to him nudged the false Trollhunter in the side, the fleshbag turned troll letting out a laugh in response and nudging them back. Draal was only barely able to restrain himself from letting out a roar and charging him right then and there.

This fake Trollhunter may not be impure, but he had no right to don that sacred armor, to brazenly stroll around the market as if he--

A loud crack split the air, momentarily startling Draal out of his fury, glancing down to see that he'd actually shattered the tankard. Shards of damp wood flecked with foam littering his hand and the table below.

"That's going on your tab," Rekl appear and brushed the remains of the shattered mug into their hand, four full ones clasped in their free arms "And you're already running quite the bill,"

Scowl returning with a vengeance, Draal grabbed his sack of barter metal from the bench beside him and and slammed it on top of the table

Rekl pulled out a can and gave it a test bite, satisfied they scooped up the bag and replaced it with one of the full tankards.

No sooner than its bottom touched the table Draal snatched up the tankard and started chugging the contents, not even registering the ale's taste. Pulling it away half empty, he was surprised to see Rekl still standing there, staring at him with a shrewd look on their face.

“You know I’m not normally one to give things away for free, but I’m gonna break my own rule and give you some advice. It was never a sure thing the amulet was going to choose you, let it go and move on.”

Only the knowledge that such an action would result in a lifelong ban from the only tavern in Trollmarket that served Kiltar mead kept Draal from throwing his tankard at Rekl's face. He growled again, closer to a roar now, tearing his gaze away from Rekl back towards the false hunter, shamelessly striding down Trollmarket's streets surrounded by his human lackeys.

“Look at that pup, he's never so much as scrapped with a goblin, let alone held a sword. He didn't even last half a minute in a spar! He has no right to bear the amulet, to wield the--”

A sudden hand on his shoulder jerked him back around, the street vanishing and Rekl's snarling face replacing it “Draal I’m going to respect the fact you’re in mourning and not throw your ass out of my pub for that comment and for what you did to that stripling in the forge,” abruptly Rekl shot up straight, shoving Draal back in his seat “But you'd best remember, if only for your own sake, that you’re a grown warrior and our *Trollhunter* is an unblooded whelp. And there's no honor in besting someone with no chance of victory.”

Before Draal could formulate a reply through the ale fueled fog in his head Rekl briskly turned and started striding away.

“And by the way, you’re cut off,”

Draal snarled, grabbed the half empty tankard, poured the last of the ale down his throat and slammed it back down. Shoving away from the table and stomping towards the exit. Rekl watched him leave with a cool gaze, none of the other patrons daring to meet his eye.

Maybe Ygrin's tavern could do a better job of supplying him with drink without any sanctimonious lectures.

Chapter End Notes

To explain Blinky's use of the term "Nestmates", in Trollmarket whelps (ie troll kids) make up a very small portion of the population. Small enough that Trollmarket only has one singular "Daycare" where troll parents will leave their young children while they're off working. Nestmates refers to trolls of roughly the same age, who went to the same daycare and grew up together, and the bonds between nestmates can be just as strong, and in some cases stronger, than those between blood siblings or relatives.

Then we meet the first of (hopefully many) troll oc's, Rekl the tavern keeper. They have six arms and their pronouns are "Quit changing the subject and pay your tab!" (or at least that's what they say whenever people ask). Rekl typically uses they/them, but they genuinely dgaf. They'd probably be some kind of nonbinary if they sat down and thought about it, but they don't have time for that gender stuff, they have a bar to run.

Coming May 26: The gang explores Trollmarket! (AKA the author's excuse for a lore/worldbuilding dump).

Chapter 15: Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Toby tried to act as chill as possible. Which was really hard to do considering the circumstances.

Smoke billowed out of the cave behind them, trolls angrily shouting at each other deep within. Both steadily growing fainter behind him, feet dangling in the air as Blinky carried him away by the back of his shirt.

Impossible circumstances for anyone to play it cool, so Toby was actually doing a pretty good job thank you very much.

The one and only consolation here was that the others were all getting the same treatment as he was. The girls in Blinky's three other hands, Mary and Claire frowning and Darci squirming a little. Even Jim had been picked up around the chestplate and was being carried along by AAARRRRGGHH. All the trolls milling the street stopping what they were doing to stare at them, then shifting their gazes to the still smoking cave with angry shouts pouring out of it.

It was only when the smoke was out of sight and the shouts had grown faint that Blinky set them all down on the cobblestone street. Folding both sets of arms, focusing and narrowing all six eyes in on them.

"I will be the first to admit, the majority of fault lies with Ilfin for trying to set up a distillery in the back of their uncle's apothecary with absolutely no experience, but when I say you are not to leave the sight of my six eyes. I mean, *you are not to leave the sight of my six eyes!*"

“How were we supposed to know the guy was trying to make moonshine?” Mary grumbled.

“Yeah it’s not our fault his set up fell apart with one tiny little poke,” Toby added “Or that the tannery next door caught fire,”

Blinky groaned and pinched his snout “Ilfin’s poor life choices aside, you all need to stay where I can see you for the duration of today's expedition,”

Happy that they weren’t getting kicked out of the magical troll market for their accidental arson, Toby was quick to nod in agreement “Understood, will do,”

The others nodded and chorused their assent as well. Jim then raised a hand and cleared his throat “Hey, uh, AAARRRGHH, can you put me down now?”

AAARRRGHH let out a soft rumble before setting Jim on his feet next to the others, giving him a soft pat on the head as he did. Well probably soft for AAARRRGHH, Jim actually stumbled a few steps.

“Now then,” Blinky began shooping them down the street “I believe your education would best be served by visiting Trollmarket’s famed metalworks district,”

Claire’s eyes sparkled “You mean like blacksmithing!?”

“Correct, as the largest hub of resources and home to many a skilled craftsman, the metalwork produced by Trollmarket is some of the finest on this side of the globe,” Blinky started walking down the street

again, gesturing for them to follow "I can think of no better place for youngsters to learn to appreciate trollish craft. *However* –" Blinky turned and narrowed all his eyes at them again "Our forges and smithys are powerful things and are not safe for the unpracticed, not even for other trolls. So. Do. Not. Get. *Close*."

The memory of that Ilfin guy's failed DIY attempt at distilling nearly exploding in their faces, not to mention their humiliating walk of shame right after after, fresh in his mind, Toby was all too quick to nod in agreement.

"Got it, look with your eyes and not your hands and don't cross over the safety line,"

"Good," Blinky said curtly.

They walked in silence, both to not irritate Blinky even further plus Toby was pretty sure their ears were all still ringing from the explosion. After following Blinky for a few more twists and turns, they ended up in a huge wide square full of trolls...sorting rocks?

"Behold the metalworks district!" Blinky threw all four arms wide "Where ores from the world over are processed, refined, and forged into every manner of item imaginable. Here one can witness their creation at every stage!" he voice dropped low "And if a single one of you moves more than a foot from my side, you will spend the remainder of this outing on top of AAARRRGHH's back,"

Getting a boost and a free ride didn't...*sound* like a punishment, but the way Blinky said it it was clearly intended to be one, so maybe Blinky knew something he didn't. Either way it was probably better to stick close if only so he didn't get his face melted off.

“Let us begin here,” Blinky shepherded them through the square, weaving between the various rock piles and the trolls sorting them. All around them Trolls were either scooping up or dumping cartfuls of rocks onto large piles, where others trolls sorted them into various smaller piles. Some of the rocks looked similar in color and texture, but some of the piles had no rhyme or reason Toby could tell. One of the sorting trolls was even *licking* the rocks before setting them in their designated piles.

“Here is where the raw ore is sorted,” Blinky explained “Organized based on the raw metals it contains and their purity,”

Blinky pointed at a troll who was filling up a wheelbarrow with crumbly looking rust colored rocks "This fellow here is gathering up iron ore, most likely for the production of trollish steel,"

The iron gathering troll glanced up at them briefly and narrowed their eyes, seemingly trying to decide if they should care about their observers before ultimately deciding not to. Pushing their wheelbarrow down one of the side streets away from the square while Blinky nudged them along after.

"So what's the difference between trollish steel and like...human stuff?" Toby asked.

"Trollish steel shares the same basic composition as the human forged metal, an alloy of iron and carbon, however a few magical additions during the smelting process make it nigh impervious to tarnish and corrosion,"

"Magical!?" Claire's eyebrows shot up "What kind of magi--"

Abruptly Blinky spread all four arms wide, blocking them from

entering the doorway the iron hauling troll had gone through.

"Stay close to me, we will enter and step immediately to the side keeping close to the wall, and above all else do not leave my side,"

The moonshine explosion fresh in his memory, Toby was quick to nod in agreement. Sticking close to Blinky as they headed in to--

A wall of heat smacked him in the face, making him stagger. It was like walking straight through an August afternoon sidewalk. He instantly started to sweat, eyes going watery. How hot did it have to be before he had to worry about his eyebrows spontaneously combusting--

A hand on his arm gently pulled him to the side, turning to see Blinky standing back against the wall, one arm each on him Mary, Darci, and Claire. Jim stepping through the doorway after them with AAARRRGHH following behind. A loud rumble startled him, Toby turning to face the room proper, only to feel his jaw drop open in shock.

The room was huge, easily the size of the gymnasium at school. And right in the middle of it was a massive clay structure, the thing radiating the intense heat, a deep glow radiating out of the top. The best way Toby could describe it was like a cooling tower from a nuclear power plant, though Toby was pretty sure that wasn't what this was...probably. At least half a dozen trolls milled around the tower. Some climbed scaffolding lining the tower, tossing cartfuls of reddish rocks

Iron ore

In to the glowing top. Off to the side four trolls, two on each side,

were pushing on some kind of see-saw looking mechanism built into the floor..

"This is the furnace where iron is refined, purified into usable metal," Blinky ushered them alongside the wall, edging around the chamber to avoid the worst of the heat "Some will be poured off to create cast iron materials," he lifted a hand from Darci's shoulder to point at a troll collecting molten metal in a bucket from where it trickled out of the base of the tower-- wait was that guy not even wearing gloves!?

"While the rest is processed into ingots for crafting into various alloys, including trollish steel,"

A gust of cool air hit Toby from behind and he found himself being pulled back out of another side door back into the non sweltering street.

"Oh man," Mary fanned herself with her hand "That was *hot*,"

Darci just shrugged "Meh, it was a dry heat,"

"Did you see that one guy handling molten metal with his bare hands!?" Toby let out a laugh, nudging Blinky with his elbow "Benefits of being made of rock I guess, I'll bet nothing burns you guys,"

Blinky started a bit, glancing over sharply at AAARRRGHH, the two sharing a look.

Uh oh, Toby knew that look. That was *not* a good look.

After a brief period of uncomfortable silence Blinky cleared his throat "I apologize, something this critical to trollkind should have been one of the first things I educated you on,"

Jim frowned, stepping closer "What do you me--"

"Sunlight burns trolls, incinerates our living stone. Any troll unlucky enough to be caught exposed on the surface at sunrise faces certain death,"

A full five seconds of stunned silence followed Blinky's words as they all stared at him in open mouthed shock.

"So wait..." Jim said slowly "When I go out in the sun I don't..."

"And that more than anything is proof of your..." Blinky glanced around nervously and lowered his voice "...true nature,"

All of a sudden Blinky snapped upright and clapped both sets of hands together "Enough of such grim topics, on with the rest of the tour!"

Blinky herded them down the street and through another doorway, leading them into a space that was a lot smaller than the smelting room, but still quite big, easily the size of a warehouse. The space was packed with barrels, boxes, and baskets; running up and down the room and lining the walls. The contents of which had nothing in common that Toby could clock, ranging from sand to gemstones to various bits of metals-- wait were those bones!?

"Here is where some of the rarest forging materials are kept," Blinky gestured towards the room "Used to create various alloys and infuse

forged products with mystical properties,"

"Mystical properties?" Claire asked, hurrying to Blinky's side "What kind of mystical properties?"

AAARRRGHH raised a hand and pointed at a barrel filled with something iridescent and flaky "Hydra scales, make trollish steel impervious to rust,"

"Whoa really?" Darci's eyes went huge.

"Indeed," Blinky stepped up to AAARRRGHH side "Hydra are fearsome beasts, native to what you humans call the 'old world', invasive and hardy. There will never be a shortage of them but bringing one down is no easy task. Just this barrel alone is easily more valuable than everything else in this storehouse,"

"I'm kind of surprised you guys just leave all this super valuable stuff out in the open," Jim said, leaning in to examine the scales.

"There is a guard posted," Blinky gave a wave to a bored looking troll sitting on a stool in the corner of the room, who gave a half hearted wave back.

"That combined with the threat of receiving a collective beating from every single smith in the market is enough to deter most thieves, now hydra scales are typically obtained through exchange with various hunting clans..."

Toby was about to head over and learn more about hydra hunting when Mary piped up.

“Hey Toby, check this out,”

He glanced over to see Mary kneeling in front of a basket full of clear, sparkling stones. Toby scurried over to her and knelt by her side, eager to check out the gemstones. They weren't completely raw, just from a single glance he could tell they'd been polished and had some basic cutting, but he'd have to run some tests to figure out what kind of gems they were--

The bored looking guard troll glanced up “Oh yeah those are the dud diamonds,”

Both of them went still in an instant, both of them slowly turning to look up at the guard troll.

Toby scrambled to his feet “Hang on did you say *diamonds*?”

“Yeah,” the troll scratched behind one of their horns “Such a pain, not a speck of power in them, and the guy who usually hauls them off is visiting her brother so now they have to sit around taking up space until she gets back,”

Mary glanced sharply up at him “Toby are these, like, dumpy rock diamonds or--”

“No...” Toby said awestruck, staring at the basket brimming with precious stones, some of them tiny as kernels of corn others the size of grapes “These...these are worth something,”

Sure they weren't as valuable as a completely cut diamonds, and Toby couldn't really gauge the quality without any of his tools, plus he might have the basic knowledge but he wasn't a gemologist. But all the ones he could see were clear and colorless as glass, and while he might not be a gemologist Toby knew that when it came to diamonds the clearer and less color the better. So even at his lowest estimate, just based on the size of some of them alone, they were looking at a *big* pile of cash here.

He snapped his gaze back over to the troll "Can we take them!?"

The troll jerked upright, bored expression slipping for the first time "You want em?"

"Y- yeah," Mary said, moving to stand at Toby's side "You said your hauling gal is off, we can take care of them for you,"

The guard troll abruptly narrowed their eyes "You want them, they won't be free,"

Toby's throat tightened, of course it was too good to be true "How much then?" he only had about twenty bucks in cash on him, he didn't know what Mary had, but hopefully it would be enough for at least a few handfuls of--

The troll looked them both up and down "Your socks, both of them, from each of you. All four for the whole basket or no deal,"

Toby turned and shared a look with Mary. He was doing his best to not freak out, but he probably looked just as stoked as she did, and Mary looked like a kindergartner who'd been handed the keys to a candy store and told to go nuts.

Mary looked up at the guard troll, a wide grin splitting her face
“Done,”

Toby tightened his belt for the third time since leaving the metalworks district. He was pretty sure the circulation was getting cut off but the heaviness in his pockets was still pulling his pants down. This combined with the chafing from his bare feet in his sneakers made the walk less than pleasant. And he knew Mary had to be in the same boat.

Note to self, next time they went shopping in Trollmarket, bring extra socks and a wagon, or at the very least a few tote bags.

As it was their load was slowing them down, but at least none of the others had noticed ye--

Jim glanced back "You guys doing ok?"

"Oh yeah we're fine," Mary bobbed her head up and down.

"Totally," Toby piped up, inwardly cringing at how nervous he sounded.

Jim raised an eyebrow but turned back around without saying anything.

As soon as his eyes were off them Toby and Mary shared a side eye. They weren't keeping the whole diamond thing a secret from the others per say....they'd just agreed to keep it to themselves until they'd figured out how much cash they would be getting out of it. Cash they would share! No way the two of them would make bank without cutting their friends in on the action. But no point in getting their hopes up when they weren't even sure how much money they'd get, best to tell them after it was already a done deal, preferably over a meal of the best burritos money could buy--

"Hey check this out guys," Claire peered over a side wall towards a lower street, the rest of them hurrying over and looking down with her.

At first Toby thought they were looking at a giant jungle gym, but after a few moments he realized it was a large cage, two trolls duking it out inside while a surrounding crowd cheered them on.

"Cool, troll MMA, totally awesomesauce,"

"Ah yes it is a truly heartwarming sight,"

Toby turned towards Blinky, seeing him staring down at the cagematch with a dreamy look on his face.

"There is nothing quite like seeing young trolls in love,"

"What? No way..." Toby turned back towards the cage match only to see that the two trolls had stopped pummeling each other and were now nuzzling each other's faces. Walking hand in hand out of the cage while the crowd cheered.

Oh, ok, guess they were.

"Is fighting in a cage match a normal dating thing for trolls?" Jim said slowly.

"On the contrary, cage matches are one of the oldest and most traditional forms of wedding among market trolls," Blinky stepped up to the wall alongside them "I am so thrilled fates aligned for you five to witness such a joyous occasion,"

Claire's gaze flicked back and forth between Blinky and the...apparent wedding party below "So besides the cage fighting, what else goes into troll weddings?"

Blinky tapped his chin thoughtfully "Marital customs vary across tribes, but most typically begin with some form of ceremonial combat, followed by the trolls involved declaring their oaths to each other before the family and communities, typically concluding with heavy feasting and celebration,"

Darci raised an eyebrow "Really? Seems kind of...violent,"

"On the contrary, ceremonial combat has been used in marriage ceremonies for centuries for both trolls involved to display their skill and what they provide to the partnership. Cage matches are traditional, but other forms of combat are popular as well. In fact for AAARRRGHH and I's wedding we conducted a simple wrestling match,"

Two wires clicked in Toby's brain, making him do a double take "Back up, you guys are married?"

Blinky turned over his shoulder and looked back at AAARRRGHH, soft smile on his face. AAARRRGHH smiled back and lumbered closer.

"Indeed, AAARRRGHH and I have been together for some years now," AAARRRGHH leaned down and nuzzled him like a cat, a gesture that Blinky just as readily returned "In fact our marriage ceremony was the first conducted in Trollmarket, within the first few days of its founding,"

For a moment Toby could only blink at them in surprise. In the entire time he'd known them he'd never clocked Blinky and AAARRRGHH as a couple couple. He was kind of still reeling from it. Of course gay people a lot of the times acted just like normal people. That plus Toby had no idea what 'normal' looked like for trolls, so maybe the lesson here was he shouldn't assume.

"So you guys were married with a wrestling match?" Jim glanced between Blinky and AAARRRGHH "Seems a little...one sided,"

Blinky scowled and set both pairs of hands on his hips "I'll have you know I held my own exceedingly well and--"

All of a sudden AAARRRGHH flopped over on his back with a loud thud, flapping his arms in the air in front of him "Ahhh, bested, defeated, have mercy..."

The five of them snickered while Blinky sputtered indignantly "AAARRRGHH cease these theatrics at once and tell these whelps--"

Without warning AAARRRGHH snatched him up against his chest and started nuzzling him with gusto, Blinky squawking and squirming in his arms.

"AAARRRGHH! Compose yourself, not in front of the striplings!"

AAARRRGHH nipped his ear playfully "No, Blinky mine forever,"

He was still squirming, but a small smile cracked through Blinky's irritated look "Oh you insatiable scoundrel you..."

Staring at the scene unfolding in front of them Toby was torn, on one hand this was objectively kind of adorable, on the other, PDA man.

Eventually Blinky pulled himself free, smoothing back his disheveled hair while AAARRRGHH pushed himself back upright "Well then the hour grows late, perhaps it is time to bring this expedition to a close..."

Toby wilted.

"But not before exploring the central corridor!" Blinky spun around and gestured for them to follow "Come along, including you AAARRRGHH, you incorrigible rascalion you,"

They followed Binky to a familiar street that Toby recognized as being close to the staircase. The street had to be at least three AAARRRGHH's wide but it was still packed, trolls wandering in and out of the various shops buried in and built out of the bedrock. As far as Toby could tell there was no common factor between the stalls themselves. One had nothing but old staticy TVs, he was pretty sure that one was some kind of restaurant or food stand, the chisel tattoo booth was here, another had a neon sign of a dead cat...the less Toby knew about that one the better.

"The shops along Trollmarket's central corridor have no central unifying factor save for the fact their services are in high demand," Blinky said, gesturing to the booths around them with both left arms "This is the busiest segment of Trollmarket, all trolls who pass through, from pilgrims to wanderers, traverse this corridor,"

Blinky abruptly turned into a doorway carved into the rock. They followed and Toby found himself having to blink to adjust his eyes to the dimmer light. Glowing crystals hung in strands from the ceiling, along with plastic buckets and-- socks? Ok he was definately going to have to figure out what the deal was with trolls and socks. Along with various boxes and more buckets lining the floor and stacked on various shelves.

"This is Bagdwella's general store, if a troll needs it she has it,"

"Correct, and *I* am Bagdwella,"

A tall curvy troll stepped out from behind a counter in the corner. She was wearing a long dress with skull decals on the skirt. Hair hanging down and covering one of her eyes, the other narrowing in on Blinky. Unlike most trolls she didn't have any horns that Toby could see.

"And my shop is a place of commerce, not a workshop for whelps. So either buy something or leave,"

Blinky let out a sigh "Oh very well," he reached into his pocket and pulled out a slip of paper, handing it over to Bagdwella "Put me down for a full case of lightbulbs,"

Bagdwella looked over the piece of paper and gave an appreciative

sniff before tucking it in her pocket "You may pursue my store, but remember you break it you bought it,

As she retreated Toby sided up to Blinky "Thanks for doing us this solid Blink,"

"Think nothing of it, AAARRRRGGHH and I were running low on light bulbs anyways. Now as you said, examine with your eyes and not your hands and if you have any questions direct them to me,"

"Hey Blinky I've got a question," Darci waved him over.

Blinky hurried to her side "Yes?"

"I've been wondering about these lights," she gestured towards the glowing crystals swinging from the ceiling "Like, what *are* they? I see them everywhere around here,"

"Ah I can see why those would grab your attention. Those are crystal lanterns, the most ubiquitous light source for troll kind. Inert, noncombustible, and capable of holding a magical charge for weeks on end,"

"Magical? Really?" Claire perked up and walked over, Jim right on her heels.

"Yes! It is a rather deceptively basic enchantment, but without the charge from the hearthstone...."

Blinky launched into a lecture about magical crystal lanterns, Toby was about to go over and get in on that action. Because hell yeah magical geology, when a hiss in his ear stopped him.

"Psst, Toby," Mary whispered "I've been thinking about the diamonds..."

Toby glanced to either side, allowing Mary to pull him into the corner of the shop before he looked up at her "What about them? They aren't fully cut so we won't get as much for them, but I think I can find a few buyers,"

She shook her head "Not that! Ok maybe later we can go over that, but what if we get more?"

Now she had Toby's full attention, facing her directly and 100% tuning out Blinky's spiel "What do you mean more?"

"If diamonds aren't valuable to trolls what about rubies, emeralds, and sapphires?" her smile was wide and ecstatic, eyes sparkling "We could keep up with this trading and make a fortune!"

Toby knew he was staring at her like a slack jawed bug eyed idiot, but given that it was taking everything he had to not jump up and down and squeal like a valley girl stereotype he'd take that as a win.

Forget burritos with all the trimmings, Nana was retiring in Malibu!

"We should be able to pick up plenty of socks from Walmart on the cheap. I'm not sure how much the diamonds will go for but it'll definitely be a net gain on our part. Plus we can trade for other

minerals to, like platinum and lithium,"

Mary nodded along eagerly "We'll have to figure out what kind of socks are the most valuable, wool or polyester,"

"And we can try and negotiate paying more to get fully cut gems, those are worth a lot more on the resale--"

"Do I hear a rival business being discussed in my shop?"

Both of them whirled to see Bagdwella standing right behind them, scowl on her face and arms folded across her chest.

Toby couldn't say anything, eyes nervously darting between Bagdwella and Mary, who had the same 'hand-in-the-cookie-jar' expression that Toby knew he had.

Oh man they'd stumbled into a troll cultural big no-no without even realizing it! Now they were going to be taken out back and get their hands worked over with hammers, or worse thrown in the sarlacc pit--

Bagdwella's single eye narrowed, then out of nowhere she smiled "If that's the case you'll want to discuss with the foragers guild, they're the ones who traverse the surface and supply Trollmarket with socks. They won't appreciate a new business undercutting theirs, but would welcome it if you began to trade directly with them. I would be all too happy to arrange a meeting and make some introductions,"

For a few seconds Toby was too stunned to react, just staring up at Bagdwella in shock.

"Does that arrangement not suit you?" Bagdwella said primly.

"That actually sounds really good..." Mary said slowly "But why would you help us, wouldn't we be...competition?"

Bagdwella let out a sharp laugh "Competition? Hardly. The foragers guild and I already have an understanding. I give them all sorts of inside hints and tips on where to locate the best forage, which in this situation is you, in return I have first pick of their best stock for my shop. Socks you trade with them are more than likely to fill my shelves,"

Toby nodded slowly "That...makes more sense,"

Bagdwella's grin widened, exposing a mouth full of sharp teeth "If you whelps are going to trade in Trollmarket, the first thing you should learn is that Bagdwella always comes out ahead,"

Chapter End Notes

The smelting room was incredibly hot, but as someone who spends summers in New Orleans with her family Darci is legally obligated to say "It's not that bad" around non-southerners complaining about the heat.

So powerless diamonds do have some value to trolls, but their value is on par with glitter/rhinestones. Something purely valued for its prettiness and has no practical use. Unlike socks, which are a tasty delicacy. Thus begins Mary and Toby's thriving enterprise.

And I've been waiting to drop this reveal for a long time. Blinky and AAARRRGHH's relationship is explicitly romantic, they are happily married and have just celebrated their 300th anniversary.

To elaborate on Toby's comment on "Normal" couples vs Gay couples, he didn't mean anything by it. Toby doesn't have a homophobic bone in his body. But in the states there is a lot of

unavoidable rhetoric in the media that implies gay couples aren't "Normal", so I felt like this was a very realistic slip up for an American teenager to make.

Next time: June 24, Jim's still not sure he's up for being the Trollhunter, maybe catching a gnome will be the perfect first mission.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Jim raced ahead, heartbeat booming and armor clanking, making him feel more than hear the rumble in the floor underneath him.

He shifted the angle of his feet, keeping traction as the ground beneath him tilted up. He practically had to jump the last few steps, only barely managing to grab the edge of the floorplate with his fingers.

Resisting the urge to pause and catch his breath, Jim gripped the edge of the floorplate and tossed himself up in one fluid motion, landing on the edge in a crouch, keeping his eyes trained on the swinging metal bars just above him.

Almost there, couldn't let himself get cocky, he'd gotten this far before only to get knocked down.

He allowed himself one deep pull of air, eyes locked on the bars, and when he spotted an opening he jumped, landing on top of one of the lowermost bars.

Jim didn't dare slow down leaping from bar to bar, climbing higher and higher while ducking and dodging, some of the bars missing him by only a hair.

Finally he was at the top. His target was only thirty feet away, but large metal balls on the end chains swung out from the walls. One hit from those would knock him all the way back to the ground. Couldn't

just leap in blindly, but if he stayed where he was for too long the bars would shift again and send him tumbling down, had to time this just right...

Just as two of the balls swung back he sprinted forward, taking advantage of the gap to race ahead. He was able to evade three balls entirely, dodging past two more, ducking down as the last one wooshed by him in a gust of air--

Jim raced ahead, heart pounding in his ears as he cleared the last few feet.

He'd never gotten this far before and now he was actually going to do it--

Grabbing the lever and yanking it down with all his might.

The bell clanged loudly, echoing through the forge over the sound of machinery.

The chains pulled back, receding into the walls, the swinging bars stopped and folded in, the shifting plates rotated flat as the platform he was standing on lowered back down.

In just a few seconds the forge had completely deactivated, leaving Jim standing flat in the middle of it.

"Splendid! Absolutely marvelous!"

Blinky strode up to him, a wide grin practically splitting his face in

half "You completed the entire course!"

Jim huffed an awkward laugh "Yeah it only took me two weeks of trying..."

"Nonsense," Blinky gripped him by the shoulder with his two right arms and started leading him to the side of the forge "This is an important milestone in your training, an indication that you are now ready for the forge's more intense regimens,"

"Blink I don't think running obstacle courses is going to help me against Bular--"

"Agility and evasive maneuvers are the backbone of both offensive and defensive combat," Blinky cut him off, holding up a finger "Awareness of your environment, the ability to move through it effectively and adapt to changes. The basics skills that you will be using time and time again, making it imperative to become well versed in these foundational abilities before mastering a higher level of combat,"

"That...makes sense..." Jim said slowly.

If he ran into Bular or Draal right now there was no doubt they'd wipe the floor with him, but it was probably good for him to learn to duck and dodge and jump around without wiping out before he started getting in to sword skills.

The only thing worse than getting his ass kicked by a troll would be jumping too high, cracking his head on a branch, and knocking himself unconscious before the troll could even throw a punch.

"Of course it does, now to verse yourself on the other foundational skill you'll need," Bliky gave him a shove towards the corner where the others were already gathered, sitting on and around a sleeping AAARRRGHH, pouring over large books "Culture!"

Darci glanced up at him from where she was reading next to AAARRRGHH's shoulder "Hey Jim, great job on the obstacle course,"

"Yeah," Claire said with a grin from AAARRRGHH's opposite side "Congrats on beating it,"

"Thanks," Jim flashed a smile, taking a seat on the ground next to Darci.

"Yeah you were a badass for sure, but you forgot to strike a victory pose at the end,"

Jim turned and leveled an unimpressed stare at Toby, who smiled back at him from his perch on AAARRRGHH's back, completely shameless.

"Stay humble," Toby reached over and patted him on the top of his head

"Now which of you has been practicing your grammar?"

"Oh oh!" Darci shot to her feet with a raised hand "He estado practicando mucho!"

Blinky blinked at her with all six eyes "While your pronunciation is impeccable, I was inquiring about your *trollish* linguistic skills,"

Darci's face darkened with a flush while the rest of them snickered.

"Don't sweat it Darc," Mary smirked at her from where she was reclining against AAARRRGHH's outstretched arm "On the plus side you'll be super ready for your oral exam tomorrow,"

Darci groaned and slumped back, burying her face in her hands "Oh man I hope so, I am not looking forward to having Señor Uhl rake me over the coals,"

Jim winced sympathetically. He would always be gratefully that the four of them insisted on joining in on his underground training every day after school, but the troll lessons on top of all their standard homework were a *lot*.

"Hey don't worry, we're all giving oral exams so it won't just be you in the hot seat,"

"You may bask in the solidarity of your shared misfortune at a later time, at the moment we are studying *Troll* lore," Blinky picked up an absolutely massive book, so big even AAARRRGHH would need both hands to hold it up, as it was Blinky needed all four arms "Which you would do well to remember, as the answers to many problems in the present can be found in the past. Toby, if you would be so kind as to wake my husband,"

"On it," Toby reached down and patted AAARRRGHH's cheek "Wakey wakey big dude,"

AAARRRGHH's eyelids fluttered, blinking and raising his head blearily "What AAARRRGHH miss?"

"Nothing yet, but we are about to share a very important history lesson with these youngsters so pay close attention," Blinky plunked down on the ground, holding up the book with his two lower arms and cracking it open with his upper hands "Now is the time for you to learn the story of one of the greatest Trollhunters to ever live,"

He turned and gestured to the statue towering high above them, an armored troll, shorter than Jim but twice as muscular, sword held high and triumphant.

"Deya the Deliverer!"

"Hang on just a sec," Mary scooted forward, pulling out her phone and pointing it in Blinky's direction. Jim couldn't see the screen but he knew it was recording video.

"All set, go ahead,"

Blinky cleared his throat, four eyes shifting down to the book and the other two focused on them, tracing lines of text with his finger.

"It was well over nine centuries ago. Troll civilization was in chaos. The Gumm Gumm warlord, Gunmar the Black, was tightening his grip, Deya the Deliverer had gone missing and persecution from Camelot drove many trolls further to the brink--"

"Wait a minute," Claire perked up, eyes glinting "You're talking about Camelot, the British empire?"

One of Blinky's eyes twitched "Correct, King Arthur had been driving trolls further and further--"

"King Arthur!" Toby shot up straight, propping himself up on AAARRRGHH's horns "We just learned about him in history class!"

Four more eyes twitched "Yes King Arthur was heavily involved in--"

"I thought that King Arthur was assassinated just before the empire fell," Darci said "Does this mean--"

A resounding bang startled them into silence, Blinky surveying them with a sharp gaze over the now shut book.

"You five need to let me finish teaching the lesson."

They nodded sheepishly, Mary miming zipping her mouth shut.

Blinky roved his gaze over all five of them, fixing them with a shrewd look before opening the book again and moving his eyes back down towards it "As I was saying, Camelot's forces, lead by King Arthur, were driving trolls out of the surface areas they'd settled,"

Claire raised her hand.

Two eyes out of six eyeballs glanced up from the book "Yes?"

"Why would trolls settle on the surface? Since sunlight is so deadly to them and all,"

Blinky's expression turned thoughtful "Perhaps 'settled' isn't the correct word, many of these trolls were forced to the surface in search of new sources of magic with which to replenish themselves. The local Dwoza hearthstone had been depleting for centuries, and other underground hearthstone sources were fiercely guarded by Gunmar and his forces,"

Mary raised her hand now.

Blinky let out a sigh "Yes Mary?"

"I thought hearthstones were a big, uber powerful magic source. How could it...deplete?"

Blinky's face fell, expression turning grim. Next to him Jim could see AAARRRGHH's face crumple into a deep wince.

"That...is a lecture for another day," Blinky cleared his throat and turned the page "For now all you need to know was that the trolls were in dire straits. Our Trollhunter missing, resources dwindling, caught between the forces of rival warlords, Dwoza was on the verge of utter annihilation..."

Abruptly Blinky snapped his head up, smiling wide "That is when the company arrived!"

Toby raised an eyebrow "You mean like Amazon?"

"I fail to see how the great river of the southern continent is involved. The company was a small group of travelers that came to Trollmarket. A strange grouping of human mages and warriors and a young troll that had been raised alongside them,"

That grabbed Jim's full attention in an instant "Wait you mean this troll had been raised by humans?"

All of Blinky's eyes locked on him with a knowing look "Exactly! In response to the looming calamity that faced us, the company urged collaboration, to form an alliance with the kingdom of Camelot against the mutual foe of Gunmar. Their idea was not a popular one, indeed many trolls balked and the human King Arthur refused, but some humans disregarded his orders and joined us, shaming the king into entering the battle himself. Not only that, in our hour of greatest need, the company found Deya the Deliverer and returned her to the battlefield!"

Blinky threw his top two arms into the air triumphantly, lower two still clasping the book "With the strength of our combined forces Gunmar and the Gumm Gumms were banished to the Darklands and thus we were victorious!"

Abruptly he dropped his arms, turning to the next page "Sadly King Arthur perished in the battle, and with him any hope of a longstanding alliance with the human kingdoms. And while Gunmar was banished the Dwoza hearthstone was too depleted to support a large population. So while the human kingdoms fell into chaos, a small group of trolls fled the European continent making their way to this land in search of a new hearthstone. Where we wandered until we eventually settled here!" Blinky spread his two upper arms, all six eyes darting around "Hearthstone Trollmarket! Which has been our home now for seven centuries,"

"Go back to the company," Jim leaned forward "What happened to them? Did they come here with you guys?"

"Alas no," Blinky shut the book and stood "The company departed as abruptly as they arrived. After the Battle of Kilahead bridge they were neither seen nor heard from again. Vanishing into the annals of history,"

"Whoa mysterious...." Toby said, dropping down from AAARRRGHH's shoulder to land at Jim's side.

Jim couldn't help but be disappointed. Sure they'd showed up nine hundred years ago, so one way or another chances are they weren't around any more. But for a brief moment he'd had the idea that he could go talk to them, or one of them specifically.

Maybe a troll raised by humans would actually get it, they could help him figure out just how to fit in to this--

"Rogue! Rogue!" from out of nowhere a wailing troll ran into the forge, flailing their arms above their head.

Blinky swiftly set the book aside and strode towards her "A rogue Bagdwella!? What manner of scoundrel troubles our market!?"

"R-- rogue gnome!"

"Uhh...a gnome?" Mary raised an eyebrow "You mean one of the little pointy hat guys that's always running around?"

"Yes!" the troll-- Bagdwella, grabbed Blinky by the shoulders and started shaking him "A rogue gnome has taken over my shop! I need

the Trollhunter to hunt it down!"

Blinky staggered for a bit after she released him, but perked up in an instant "Aha! Our young Trollhunter's first calling!"

Jim's started "Wait a what now?"

"A calling! A sacred mission on behalf of Trollmarket and everyone in it!"

"I don't know Blink I mean I just figured out the obstacle course--"

Blinky hauled Jim up by the shoulders and began pushing him out of the forge "Nonsense, the Trollhunter answers *every* call, and I can think of no better first mission for our young hunter!"

"Must all these humans really be present?" Bagdwella whispered to him.

Blinky glanced up, spotting the humans and Master Jim peering through the Bagdwella's wares. Mercifully they appeared not to hear her. AAARRRRGGHH would most certainly have heard had he not opted to remain outside so as to not crowd the shop. It wasn't as though Blinky didn't understand, he was well aware the humans' presence was...disquieting to some, but they were Master Jim's nestmates, his comrades in arms, and Blinky couldn't in good

conscience send them away. Besides, Vendel had crafted an easy answer in response to questions or objections to their presence.

"They pledged themselves to aid Master Jim after he saved them from Bular," Blinky made sure to keep his voice low "It would be a travesty to keep them from fulfilling their oath,"

Bagdwella didn't look wholly happy with that explanation, opening her mouth to no doubt tell him her precise thoughts, only to be cut off as a sharp chittering broke through the shop.

"There's the gnome!" Toby pointed at a cabinet, a flash of red darting behind it "Quick quick grab it!"

Jim darted down towards the cabinet, only to have Mary do the same from the opposite direction. The two colliding with grunts and shouts, Master Jim falling back with a crash and Mary landing on top of him.

"Hang on I got it," Claire swung a human made net down, one designed for collecting insects if Blinky remembered correctly. Knocking aside jars and crystals in a futile attempt to ensnare the gnome, the red capped little beast easily outpacing her, dodging each and every clumsy swing of her net.

"Mind the wares!" Bagdwella shouted "Those potions are expensive!"

"Claire over here send it my way!" Darci held a large ceramic jar in one hand, the lid in the other. Crouched down low to no doubt ensnare the gnome.

Claire turned towards her, using the net to try and swat the gnome in

Darci's direction. Only to slip on a bottle underfoot, swinging the net up and smacking Darci in the chin with it.

"Oh shoot, sorry!"

"Cut off its escape!" Toby pushed an empty box down, missing the gnome by inches "Force it out in the open!"

Master Jim let out a sharp yip "It's climbing on me, oh god it's on me now--"

"Fantastic job! You really have him on the ropes!" Bagdwella flashed a too wide smile at the striplings, one that quickly morphed into a scowl as she turned towards Blinky "Just what the hell are you teaching him!?" she hissed "A *gnome* is running circles around him and his human compatriots!"

Blinky forced out an awkward chuckle "He's...adjusting to Trollmarket. He needs time to adapt after a lifetime spent on the surface,"

A creak and a groan was all the warning they received before a large shelf crashed to the ground, landing in a symphony of splintering wood and shattering glass.

Bagdwella's glare intensified, it took everything Blinky had to resist squirming under her gaze.

"Well you had better *adjust* your teaching methods," she said with a growl "The fact he is struggling so badly against a single gnome reflects poorly on *your* teaching methods above all else,"

Master Jim's eyes landed on them, Bagdwella's countenance shifting from stormy to sunny in an instant "Great work!" she called out "You'll have the rapscaillion gnome in no time!"

Master Jim's expression shifted to something perturbed, then the gnome raced across his chest plate, Mary smacked him with a broom in a futile attempt to dislodge the creature, sending him staggering back with a yelp, and his all focus was on the gnome again.

Blinky kept his gaze focused on his charges, but his mind kept turning over Bagdwella's words. Had he not been pushing Master Jim hard enough? No, he didn't think so. His confidence was a fragile thing, requiring careful stoking to grow in pace with his skills. Master Jim had just cleared the forge's most basic obstacle course, a far cry from pursuing a small, living target through a cluttered space. But Master Jim could not choose his callings, and they would come regardless of his skill level or the tools at his disposal--

"Enough!" Bagdwella threw up her arms and stomped towards the striplings "All these extra sets of hands are distracting the Trollhunter and making a mess of my shop, I'll take two of them to help me sort my storehouse while the rest handle the gnome,"

Before Blinky could so much as utter a protest Bagdwella had snagged both Mary and Toby by the arm and was quickly hauling them away.

Master Jim looked over in alarm "Hey wait you can't just--"

"It's cool Jimbo!" Toby called back over his shoulder "Bags here is chill, we'll go for a little field trip and meet up with you before we leave,"

"Call me 'Bags' again and you'll be making your way home from the bottom of the reservoir," Bagdwella said gruffly.

"There, see?" Mary piped up "Totally chill..."

With that Bagdwella vanished out of the shop and out of sight, taking Toby and Mary with her. Blinky's eyes darted between the doorway where she vanished and his remaining charges. In the end he opted to focus on the group making the most distressing noises, turning his full attention back to Master Jim, Claire, and Darci.

Master Jim attempted to pounce on the gnome, only to knock a box of gravel onto Claire's foot, sending her hopping back with a shriek.

In an instant Master Jim's focus was shattered "Sorry Claire, I--"

The gnome scurried on top of his head, the cheeky creature actually giving a mocking wave at them. Darci charged forward with the jar, only to have the gnome dart away at the last second, the jar shattering uselessly against Master Jim's horns.

Master Jim jerked upwards with a yelp, more instinct than anything else, but still with the effect of knocking into Darci and sending her crashing down on top of him. One of Darci's arms struck Claire in the face, and Claire, still off balance from her wounded foot, was sent spinning and tumbling into them, the three landing in a groaning, twitching pile on the floor.

Try as he might Blinky couldn't quite keep the wince off his face. Loathe as he was to admit it Bagdwella had a point, an adjustment was needed.

He approached, the three slowly detangling themselves and getting to their feet.

"How fared you against the gnome?" an arguably unnecessary question, Blinky had seen with his own six eyes precisely how they fared.

"We..." Master Jim stood, leaning back and popping his spine with a wince "We didn't catch it,"

"No shit," Claire mumbled, rubbing her nose.

"But we did figure out where its main hidey hole," Darci pointed to a stone wall previously covered by a large shelf, now that the shelf had been knocked away a small burrowing hole in the base of the wall was apparent "I think it goes in there when it's done snatching stuff from Bagdwella's store,"

Blinky couldn't fight the wide grin spreading across his face and didn't even bother to try.

Oh his brilliant, perceptive pupils!

Master Jim glanced up at him "So we found the gnome's hiding spot, any ideas how to get him out?"

In an instant the idea came to him, so perfectly immaculate it was a wonder that it hadn't occurred to him earlier.

Perhaps aiding Master Jim in his hunt for the gnome wasn't a matter of forcing him to master a higher level of skills than he was ready for, but providing the proper tool.

"I believe I may have the solution for that, but now is the time to rest and regroup," he ushered the three of them towards the exit with all four arms "We shall retire to my library to discuss why our hunt today was...less than successful. Then the five of you will return home to rest and recuperate while I acquire the proper supplies, for tomorrow we begin our fight anew. And this time, *you* shall be victorious!"

Chapter End Notes

Bagdwella just grabbed Toby and Mary so they could help her do some organizing. No arranging clandestine meetings to discuss the illicit trade of precious gems for soiled hosiery here.....

Aside from just progressing the plot, I had two main goals with this chapter.

1# Wizards foreshadowing (and you'd better believe I'm tweaking a few things to fix the continuity).

2# Establishing the starting point for the Arcadia quintet's skill set.

Not only is Jim woefully inexperienced in combat, only now really starting to practice the necessary agility exercises. The group as a whole has terrible cohesion. More than just struggling to catch the gnome (and make no mistake they were BAD at it) they can't coordinate their movements and work effectively as a team. They were constantly bumping into each other and tripping over each other. Even if their hunting skills were a little better, they still would have failed due to constantly getting in each others' way.

So this is to show their starting point, exactly where they're growing from. Over time (and a whole heck of a lot of struggle) the Arcadia quintet is going to grow from a group of fumbling teenagers to a highly skilled, cohesive group of fighters.

Coming July 22: With a little extra help Jim faces down the

gnome once and for all, but can he find it in himself to "finish" the fight?

Chapter 17: Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Jim lowered his papers and held his breath, waiting for Señor Uhl to say something.

"Thank you Jim for your...adequate presentation on the history of chicken mole," Señor Uhl glanced down and made a mark on the paper in front of him "Next presenter!"

It was all Jim could do not to collapse from relief right then and there, forcing himself to pick up his feet and trudge back to his seat. He was so groggy he honestly didn't know how he'd done well enough to pass as 'adequate'. Not only had he gotten back late from Trollmarket last night, he'd stayed up for hours finishing all his chores. Even with his lower than average sleep requirements Jim didn't think he was getting enough. More than anything he just wanted this class to be over so he could spend his free period napping in the library. Then maybe, just maybe, he'd actually have enough energy to get through play rehearsal and gnome hunting this afternoon.

Flopping down into his desk, Jim raised his head to see Darci step up to the front of the room. Clearing her throat and starting her own Spanish presentation.

Jim was so out of it it took him a few seconds to realize the words coming out of Darci's mouth weren't spanish.

He froze in his seat, staring at Darci with his mouth hanging open as she continued her speech in a very guttural language that he'd only ever heard underground. Had to do something, clue her in--

Before he could do anything the entire room erupted in laughter.

Darci snapped her head up, eyes flicking down to her paper and back up again, cheeks flushing dark.

Señor Uhl narrowed his eyes, scribbling on his paper ominously "I don't know if you thought you would get bonus points for creativity but that is not the way I conduct my lessons. This is *Spanish* class, not Klingon-fantasy speak class,"

The laughter rose in pitch and volume, Darci's face somehow got even darker.

"Sorry-- I-- I mean lo siento, I-- I gotta go--" she darted towards the door and ran out of the room

"Wait Darci--" Jim jumped up and raced after her, ignoring Señor Uhl's shout and more laughter from behind him, shoving his way out the door and into the hall.

Glancing in either direction he couldn't see Darci. He didn't want to leave her alone right now, the spotlight was never her thing, but to mix up spanish and trollish in front of the whole class, and in front of Señor Uhl of all teachers. That was a whole new level of embarrassing, but which way did she--

His vision was swallowed up by blue and brown "Something the matter Mr. Lake?"

Oh no, talk about the last thing he needed right now.

Jim sheepishly lifted his gaze to see Mr. Strickler staring down at him with one eyebrow raised.

"Oh uh...Darci, had a little trouble with her oral presentation," he tried to keep his voice steady and not come out as an anxious crackle "I wanna make sure she's doing ok,"

Mr. Strickler let out a soft chuckle "How caring, you truly are a thoughtful young man,"

Despite everything Jim couldn't help but perk up a little at the praise.

"And forgive me for eavesdropping, but I'm almost certain it wasn't spanish Miss Scott was using in her presentation, do you happen to know what language she was using?"

Just like that whatever sense of relief he had plummeted "Oh-- uh... it's a fantasy language, completely made up, from-- from our LARPing!"

Not the world's greatest cover story, but Jim was pretty proud of himself for coming up with something semi-believable on the fly like that.

Mr. Strickler's eyebrow arced again "I didn't know the five of you were interested in live action role playing?"

Jim forced out a laugh that he hoped didn't sound as awkward as it felt "Yeah, it's kind of a new thing, some...friends got us into it,"

"That does sound interesting, I hope you will tell me more about this role playing of yours, and your new friends,"

Jim smiled and nodded but on the inside his stomach sank. Now on top of homework, the play, and underground troll training he had to come up with some kind of role playing campaign to tell Mr. Strickler about. Just great, one more thing to worry about.

"Well I won't keep you," Mr. Strickler turned and started walking away, only to pause and glance back over his shoulder "And I believe I saw Miss Scott heading for the library,"

His heart leapt, finally something working out in his favor. Jim jerked his head up and down in thanks before he started powerwalking down the hall towards the library.

"Got it, thanks Mr. Strickler!"

"You don't really need to be here for this mom,"

She just smiled back at him "Sorry kiddo, but there's no way I'm missing your first official Troll Fighter job,"

"Yeah so what if it's more of a pest control gig," Toby piped up "This is your first official mission!"

Jim buried his face in his hands with a groan "Don't remind me..."

"Hey don't worry," Darci patted his arm consolingly "No matter how painful and humiliating this turns out...Mary will document the whole thing on video,"

Mary gave a perky grin and waved her phone at him.

Jim looked up, completely stone faced "... you guys need to work on your bedside manner a bit,"

The other kids just smirked back at him shamelessly, a few of them even giggling.

"Oh relax," Barbara stepped forward and started drawing the arch with the crystal key Blinky had given them. There was a specific name for it, something that started with 'H' but she couldn't recall it at the moment "I'm sure you'll be able to catch this gnome easy peasey,"

The timing really wasn't ideal. She didn't work tonight but she had on call hours starting at 8pm, so she needed to rest when she could in case she was called in. Not to mention she still had to organize her bank papers and credit card statements.

Still, when Jim had told her about his first official mission Barbara knew there was no way she was sitting this out. Jim had tried to

downplay it but she'd insisted. Come hell or high water, she would be there to support her son.

"Yeah," Claire hopped through the gateway and headed towards the stairs, a skip in her step and a grin flashed in Jim's direction "Provided gnomes don't have secret magic superpowers,"

"Ok seriously, you guys need to work on your peptalks," Jim followed them in, despite his grumpy tone Barbara could see a grin fighting it's way through on his face.

Barbara had to bite back a laugh as they headed down the stairs. Not for the first time she found herself immensely grateful that Jim wasn't going through this alone, that he had his friends to cheer him up and help him out.

"So if the gnome beats you, does that mean the gnome is the new Trollhunter?"

"Tobes I *will* push you down the rest of these steps,"

Finishing their descent, Barbara saw Blinky and AAARRRGHHH waiting for them at the base of the stairs.

"Greetings master Jim! Are you ready for your final showdown against the foul gnome!"

"As I'll ever be..." Jim mumbled.

"Excellent! And never fear, AAARRRGHH and I have procured a secret weapon that will ensure the tide of victory turns in your favor,"

"A secret weapon..." Barbara glanced up towards AAARRRGHH, only to see his mouth twisted in a grimace.

"Bad idea..."

"Nonsense my lumbering companion, this is an ingenious bit of strategy," Blinky turned and started hurrying into the market, forcing the rest of them to follow him.

Barbara eyed the back of Blinky's head as he lead them through crowded streets. It was clear that Blinky meant well, and Jim had only good things to say about his training sessions with him, but AAARRRGHH struck her as the more level headed of the two. And his hesitance put her on edge--

"Well well...if it isn't the mighty Trollhunter himself!"

A new troll stepped out in front of them, forcing them to stop and immediately putting Barbara on edge. This troll's tone had been anything but friendly, and based on his appearance, blue skin and spiked back, this had to be none other than Draal.

She narrowed her eyes at up the sneering troll, lips pressed into a hard line. When she'd heard about what Draal had done to Jim she'd immediately gone straight back down to confront Vendel about how if adults beating up children was part of troll culture then Jim would have no part of it.

To his credit Vendel was immediately contrite, and assured her that was most certainly *not* part of troll culture, and he would have a word with Draal and ensure that this wouldn't happen again.

However Vendel had also made clear that while Draal wouldn't attack Jim, his attitude was very likely to stay sour. After a brief explanation Barbara understood...to an extent. Draal was mourning and confused, dealing with questions he might never get good answers to. But if he thought his grief permitted him to use Jim as his punching bag Barbara was going to have something to say about that.

"Draal!" Blinky threw his arms out wide, stepping towards him with a forced smile stretched across his face "What brings you to this corner of the market?"

Draal's red and yellow gaze shifted over to Jim, giving a smile that was all teeth "Can't a troll be curious about our new hunter's progress...."

Barbara had heard enough, shouldering past Blinky standing face to face against Draal "Not when they've behaved the way you have. If you don't have any business here I suggest you leave."

Draal's grin was instantly replaced with a sneer "Pathetic that the Trollhunter needs a fleshbag to fight his battles--"

"I can fight my own battles just fine," Barbara felt Jim's hand on her shoulder gently tugging her back, she brushed him off and took another step forward "Right here right now if I have to,"

Draal snarled and loomed closer. Barbara's hand was already in her pocket flicking the safety off her pepper spray when AAARRRGHH sided up to her.

"Leave," AAARRRGHH growled "Not good for Trollhunter, not good for Draal,"

"I concur," Blinky stepped up to her side, both of them flanking Barbara now "AAARRRGHH and I are more than happy to aid you in this tumultuous time, but right now our duty is to aide Master Jim with his first hunt,"

If Draal wasn't angry before he sure was now, lips pulled back to expose sharp teeth, fists tense at his sides. For a moment it seemed like he might charge them, fists swinging, but after a few seconds he snorted and relaxed his shoulders, turning and stomping off while muttering something in trollish. Trolls in the busy market surrounding them who'd been staring at the confrontation all quickly found something else to look at.

Barbara watched him leave through narrowed eyes.

She couldn't fight all of Jim's battles for him, nor did she want to. Troll hunting business aside she wanted Jim to be able to be independent and solve his issues himself without his mother's constant interference. However there was a big difference between letting her son learn how to problem solve and letting every troll with misguided anger issues pick a fight with him. And if any grown trolls down here thought they could get away with being violent towards her teenage son they'd find themselves on the business ends of her pepper spray and car keys.

And depending on how much notice she had, maybe even a shotgun.

Jim's hand was on her shoulder again, this time she allowed him to pull her back.

"Let's just get to Bagdwella's," Jim's voice was high and sharp, smile not fully reaching his eyes "I'm sure she's anxious to get that gnome out of her shop,"

Watching Draal vanish around a corner ahead of them, Barbara let out a soft exhale "Yes, let's go ahead,"

They made it the rest of the way to Bagdwella's shop without incident, finding Bagdwella herself standing outside. As soon as she saw Jim she rushed up to him and grabbed him by the shoulders.

"Oh thank Gorgus you're here Trollhunter!" she shook him back and forth "This rogue gnome is destroying my livelihood. You must exterminate it with haste, my future depends on it!"

Rattling in his armor, Jim still managed to bob his head up and down "Of-- of course, don't worry I'll take care of it,"

"Quickly!" Blinky hurried them inside "The key to your success lies just within,"

"Bad idea!" AAARRRGHH said, more urgent this time.

Frowning, Barbara darted ahead of the others, catching up with Blinky and finding him standing in front of a tall metal box that had been set up against the shop's back wall. Light yellow lines etched into it giving the impression of a trollish face.

"How's a tricked up gym locker supposed to give Jim the edge?" Claire

rapped the side with her knuckles, resulting in a hollow clanging sound.

"This is the fergolator!"

"Fer-ga-what now?" Toby raised an eyebrow.

"The fergolator," Blinky pulled the door open "An ancient piece of trollish machinery used to shrink components for mining,"

Darci did a double take "Hang on did you say 'shrink'?"

"Indeed," Blinky's grin widened "For if the gnome will not come out, you Master Jim must go in!" he pulled the door open and gestured inside "Come along, hop in now,"

Jim eyed the machine uneasily, slowly raising a foot and taking a hesitant step forward, only to have Barbara stride ahead and shut the door in his face.

"No." she said, leveling Blinky with a flat stare.

All of Blinky's eyes swiveled towards her, expression twisted with confusion "No?"

"No you are not putting Jim inside a machine designed for shrinking mining equipment,"

AAARRRGHH nodded in agreement, moving through the cramped store to stand beside her "Bad idea,"

Blinky crossed two of his arms and planted the other two on his hips "I beg your pardon!? This is an ingenious move of strategy,"

Barbara felt her frown deepen "Setting aside the risks of sending Jim inside that gnome's nest, where none of us would be able to help him if something went wrong, putting him inside a machine designed to treat mining supplies is a terrible idea, and who knows if it would even work,"

Blinky made an affronted noise "Of course it will work! This fergolator is top of the line,"

Barbara allowed her stare to harden into a glare, Blinky starting to shift uncomfortably under her gaze.

"You misunderstand me. There are untold risks to putting a living organism inside a machine designed to process inorganic matter. What if in the process of shrinking him it crushes his spine, or his organs burst under the pressure?"

"Yeah I'm all for my organs not exploding," Jim cut in.

AAARRRGHH nodded along "Bah-boo-rah right, fergolator bad idea."

Blinky glanced between the two of them with a sour look on his face, then without warning he threw the door of the fergolator open, yanked the level on the side, and hopped in. The door clanging shut behind him as the machine whirred to life.

There were a few seconds when none of them reacted, too stunned to fully process what had happened, then the machine started to rock rapidly and emit loud whirs and bangs.

Jim rushed up to it, yanking on the handle of the door, Barbara and AAARRRGHH pulling along with him. Even if she disagreed with Blinky she couldn't let him get hurt in a misguided attempt to prove a point. But even with all three of them pulling the door refused to budge. After a few more seconds of bangs and rocking the machine went still and silent, the door popping open to reveal--

"Ah hah! Success!"

Watching Blinky strut confidently out of the machine Barbara adjusted her glasses, unable to believe what her eyes were telling her. Blinky now only standing at half a foot tall and looking pleased as punch.

Given everything that had happened over the last few weeks, and honestly the past decade, Barbara liked to consider herself pretty open minded to a lot of possibilities most people would consider outlandish. Things like magical amulets and secret underground troll cities took a little adjustment to get used to, but she felt like she'd handled the revelations with a decent amount of grace.

But something about seeing one of Jim's troll teachers, normally well over six feet now tottering around less than knee high, left her standing there with her mouth hanging open in stupefied shock.

"The shrinking process was a success," he grinned smugly up at Barbara "And my spine and organs are completely intact thank you very much,"

AAARRRGHH glanced from side to side frantically, it took Barbara a few seconds to realize that between the size difference and Blinky standing directly below him AAARRRGHH could hear him but he couldn't see him "Where Blinky?"

"Down here good fellow!"

AAARRRGHH frantically glanced around, a sharp whine escaping his throat " *WHERE BLINKY!?* "

"Here I'm here! I--" Blinky darted over to Barbara and tugged on the leg of her scrubs "Could you give me some assistance my vertically gifted compatriot?"

She could hear the kids snickering behind her, but Barbara reached down and helped Blinky climb onto her shoulder. The sensation was...odd, stubby stone feet scrabbling against her skin, his weight was certainly noticeable but nothing that gave her trouble as she helped him find a stable perch on her shoulder. Lifting him up so that AAARRRGHH could finally see him, eyes going wide as literal dinner plates.

"Blinky...tiny?"

"Indeed," Blinky folded both sets of arms and sat back on Barbara's shoulder "The fergolator accomplished its task, now Master Jim hop in and--"

"No."

Blinky looked up at her "But--"

"Yes the machine did what you thought it would this time," Barbara cut him off "But one incidence is not indicative of a trend,"

"But Master Jim has a gnome to vanquish! And if the gnome will not come out--"

Barbara shifted her head and fixed Blinky with a look usually reserved for only the most difficult patients "Blinky I will drive my car down here and monoxide that gnome myself before I let you put Jim in that machine!" she snapped, patience at an end.

"....you would bring your automobile here?"

This time it was both Barbara and AAARRRGHH who fixed Blinky with unimpressed looks.

Blinky wilted on his perch "Right, perhaps we can discuss automobiles another day,"

Barbara sucked in a deep breath through her nose, and turned back towards the kids "How about instead of going in after the gnome we use bait instead,"

Darci glanced up at her "Bait?"

"You mean like grab some food that gnomes go bananas for?" Claire said slowly, a smile working its way across her face "Lure the gnome out of his hiding place with it!"

"Yeah!" Toby piped up, wide grin matching Claire's "Instead of Jim going to the gnome we make the gnome come to us!"

Jim was slowly nodding along with them "That...sounds good,"

"While it is indeed cunning I maintain that the use of the fergolator was a sound tactic," Blinky groused.

Barbara turned towards him "So what exactly do gnomes like to eat?"

"Oh my gosh these boiled swamp maggots are the best!" Toby said loudly.

Jim narrowed his eyes at him from where he was crouched outside the gnome's hole, mouthing something Barbara guessed was along the lines of 'don't overdo it'.

"Indeed!" Blinky shouted from his perch on Barbara's shoulder "I do believe these may just be the most ripe maggots I've ever tasted!"

"The ripest!" Mary practically shouted "And we have so many of them, I don't know how we're gonna eat them all,"

"Yeah...." Darci rolled her eyes from where she was fanning the steam from the bubbling pot towards the hole in the wall "Swamp maggots, gotta love them,"

Again Barbara found herself having to hold back an inappropriate giggle. The swamp maggots, generously provided by Bagdwella were....pungent, to put it kindly. Although she noticed Jim sniffing them earlier with a look of piqued interest on his face. Were swamp maggots...nutritious for trolls? She may have to ask Bagdwella if she could take these home when they were done--

A soft chitter came from inside the hole, Jim going stone still on his perch.

A hush fell over the other kids, all their eyes locked on the gnome hole. Blinky and Barbara were staring right along with them, her gaze flickering from Jim to the hole below him his own eyes were locked on.

More sounds, the scuffle of claws on stones, a curious sounding cheep, growing steadily louder.

With out the rest of his body moving so much as an inch, Jim slowly rotated his neck up to face them.

'Keep it up' he mouthed.

"Yeah I've eaten so many of these already," Claire called out, though the expression on her face said that was the absolute last thing she wanted to do.

"Don't eat too fast!" Barbara added "We only have so many,"

A more distressed sounding cheep came from the hole, the skittering sounds intensifying.

"I just ate five!" Toby cupped a hand around his mouth, projecting his voice to the point of near shouting "We might actually finish the pot!"

The scratching was louder than ever, the gnome must be right inside the hole. Jim held up a hand, the five of them instantly falling silent, staying perched in place eyes locked on the gnome hole.

A red hat hesitantly poked out of the hole with a soft chitter. Jim staying stone still in place above it.

A small face and a white beard followed the hat. The gnome taking a few hesitant steps outside his hole. As soon as he spotted the bubbling cauldron he let out an ecstatic peep, racing away from the hole towards--

Nearly faster than Barbara's eyes could clock Jim sprang into action, leaping down and pouncing on the unsuspecting gnome.

The gnome whirled and let out a shriek, but it was too late. Jim snatched him up with both hands. The gnome yelped and scratched but Jim held him fast, the gnomes claws scrabbling uselessly against Jim's gauntlets.

"Got him! Get the--"

"On it!" Darci scrambled towards him, bag held at the ready. The others following right on her heels.

Jim snatched up the bag and tossed the gnome inside, cinching the drawstring tight.

Then just like that it was done, Jim holding the trapped gnome thrashing inside the canvas.

"Alright dude!" Toby elbowed him in the side "You completed your first official Trollhunter mission!"

Jim felt a smile creeping across his face "Yeah...I did didn't I,"

"You sure did," Barbara stepped up to him beaming "And I'm proud of you,"

"Indeed you were glorious!" Blinky cheered.

AAARRRGHH rumbled "Good job,"

If he'd been in his human shape Barbara knew Jim would have been bright red "Well I mean...you guys helped a lot,"

Mary snorted "Heck yeah we did,"

"Oh splendid!" Bagdwella stepped towards them, a gigantic smile on her face "That irritating gnome is gone at last!" she bent down and

swiftly snatched up the cauldron "But these swamp maggots have a buyer, so you'd better not have eaten any Blinkous,"

On her shoulder Blinky sputtered indignantly "This is the thanks I receive for preserving your livelihood!? Bah-boo-rah, approach so I may rain blows down upon this impertinent shopkeep!"

Barbara held up a hand to keep Blinky from falling "We're glad we could take care of this for you Bagdwella, thank you for all your help,"

Bagdwella harrumphed "At least one of you has a sense of common courtesy, now if you'll excuse me I have a customer waiting," with that she strode off, taking the swam maggots and their unique aroma with her.

Behind her Barbara heard Toby clear his throat "Hey Blinky how come you're still fun size? Shouldn't the shrinking have worn off by now?"

"Cease your worries Tobias," Blinky unfolded one set of arms to wave him off "The fergolator's effects should only last for an hour,"

Claire glanced down from Blinky to her phone "But you went inside the ferga-whatever over two hours ago,"

Blinky froze, each of his eyes blinking in turn "....I what?"

AAARRRGHH's expression turned utterly heartbroken "Blinky small...forever?"

"No no no!" Blinky scrambled to the edge of Barbara's shoulder, all four arms held out in a placating gesture in AAARRRGHH's direction "I am certain I shall return to my true size...eventually,"

"Maybe you should talk to Vendel," Darci piped up.

A deep wince etched itself on Blinky's face "Perhaps I should...Bah-boo-rah, if you would be so kind as to deposit me in my husband's hand,"

Reaching up, she shifted her free arm into a a bridge of sorts, allowing Blinky to scurry off her shoulder onto AAARRRGHH's waiting palm, before turning back towards the kids "I'll let you kids finish up here, I'm glad I got to see Jim's first official troll mission, but I have some things to work on back at home,"

"Got it," Jim nodded at her "We'll take care of him--" he gestured to the very lively, very *angry* sack in his hand "And talk to Vendel about getting Blinky back to normal,"

They headed out of the shop, Barbara heading towards the exit while the kids, AAARRRGHH, and Blinky headed towards Vendel's cave.

She'd just started ascending the stairs when a loud shout came from behind her.

" *Blinkous just what sort of nonsense have you gotten mixed up in now!* "

For the first time tonight Barbara allowed the laughter she'd been holding in to escape, heading up the stairs back to the waiting world above giggling all the while.

If this troll hunting job of Jim's turned out to be nothing but study sessions and pest control she would happily take it.

Chapter End Notes

Blinky I love you but your plan to put a teenage human inside a machine designed to shrink mining equipment was...not great.

And Barbara's not afraid to throw hands with trolls, any time any place. She's 100% ready and willing to throw down. (By this point the rest of Trollmarket is developing a healthy respect for her)

So Jim was able to successfully catch the gnome, but he's yet to been given the talk about the necessity of finishing the fight, which is going to be a lot harder for him. Furthermore thanks to his overhearing Strickler now KNOWS the kids are involved to some extent in trollish business, which put them on Strickler's radar immediately, and not in a good way. Strickler doesn't know any of the details, so for the time being he's going to observe without becoming involved, but the kids are completely in the dark. Strickler's holding all the cards, but the kids haven't even realized they're playing yet.

Next time August 19: Jim is told that the Trollhunter must always finish the fight, but might not be able to complete this one part of the mission.

Chapter 18: Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"The effects of the fergalator should wear off within a day or two, provided you don't engage in some *other* manner of foolishness in the interim,"

"No no..." Blinky sat back on a large book on top of Vendel's desk "I'm quite through with experimentation for the time being,"

Jim kept his eyes locked on Blinky from where they were all clustered at the edge of the desk. Seeing Blinky so...tiny was still bizarre. He'd been six inches high for a couple hours now and Jim still couldn't believe that had almost been him. It was good to hear that the shrinking would wear off soon, although all the photos and video he'd seen Mary taking would last forever.

"Yeah I think my mom was right about this one, testing old troll technology on ourselves was a bad idea,"

"At least it didn't turn you inside out," Toby piped up from behind him "That would have been...messy,"

"Bah-boo-rah was indeed correct in her misgivings of using the fergalator," Vendel narrowed his gaze in on Blinky "Now until the consequences of your impulsivity wear off I suggest you remain within my workshop, or risk being stepped on the moment you set foot in the street,"

AAARRRGHHH nodded "No step on Blinky,"

Sensing a good moment had come Jim cleared his throat, all three trolls shifting their gazes towards him.

"So now that Blinky's situation's all figured out, what should we do with this guy?" he held up the still squirming sack, the gnome's furious cheeping having quieted to the occasional chitter.

Darci rocked forward onto the tips of her feet, hands clasped behind her back "Yeah you guys have a gnome shelter or something we can drop him off at?"

Blinky pushed himself up off the book "Now master Jim, the time has come for you to finish the fight,"

Jim glanced at the bag still swinging wildly in his hands "He's pretty well contained, so I'd say the fight is over,"

"While the gnome still lives the fight is yet to be completed,"

It took a few seconds for Blinky's words to sink in but when they did Jim went still, something cold flickering to life in his gut, "You mean...kill him?"

Blinky gave a curt nod "Correct,"

Mary winced back with a hiss "That seems pretty harsh,"

Blinky folded both sets of arms behind his back and strode forward across the table "Ours is an unforgiving world, to be the Trollhunter, you must be prepared to do what needs to be done to vanquish a foe,"

Jim floundered, glancing back and forth between Blinky and the sack in his grip, jaw gaping open and shut "But-- it's-- he's just a little...fella,"

Vendel sighed and gave his head a shake "Yes this may be but a small gnome, but what of a colony of them that lays waste to food stores, or a group of scavengers threatening to expose the market? Small as they may be rouge gnomes are a threat, and the Trollhunter must extinguish *every* threat,"

"But I mean....isn't there like an exception? A time for the Trollhunter to show mercy--"

"Ruthlessness is mercy upon ourselves," Vendel's voice was stone, his gaze steel "Mercy invites opportunities for foes to regroup, to return and cause more devastation another day. There is a steep price to pay for allowing an enemy to live, and for the Trollhunter that price is far greater,"

Jim couldn't believe what he was hearing. They actually wanted him to go ahead and-- to-- to actually *kill* a helpless little gnome!?

He looked towards Blinky and AAARRRGHH for help, but while AAARRRGHH looked sad he didn't speak up, and Blinky was enthusiastically nodding along.

"Vendel speaks true, you *must* finish the gnome post haste in order to--"

Vendel rapped his staff on the ground, a loud clack of stone on stone "No. The Trollhunter must make this choice on his own. We will not always be here to guide him, so he must find the will to do what needs to be done within himself,"

Jim shifted his gaze to the sack, stomach churning dangerously. A feeling that only intensified as they headed out of the market and began their trek through the woods.

He stared down at the sack, the woods were dark but thanks to the multiple cell phone flashlights he could see the squirming sack crystal clear. Its contents thrashing and chittering in rage, fighting back the urge to vomit.

Blinky and the others wanted him to *kill* the gnome. A creature who's only crime was irritating someone bigger than him.

Feeling the gnome squirm inside the canvas made Jim keenly aware of the size difference between them. If he wanted to he could crush him with a single hand. He knew he could, he was strong enough, it wouldn't be hard. But didn't the fact that he could mean that he shouldn't...

"Have you figured out what you're going to do with...him?" Claire nudged her head towards the sack.

Jim grimaced "No..."

"I mean, maybe you can just release it in the woods somewhere," Mary darted ahead, walking backwards to face him while keeping up their pace "He starts a new life in the city open space and Blinky will never

know,"

"But what if he sneaks back to Trollmarket? Or if he gets photographed by some vlogger? Blinky said I have to take responsibility, I can't just ditch him,"

"You know what *I* think," Toby climbed onto the trash can, using the boost to swing a leg over the top of the fence, turning and looking down at Jim sharply "I think you need to forget about what Blinky said. So what if you're not a Deya the Deliverer or a Kanjigar the Courageous or a Gorgus the Great--"

"Way to rub it in," Jim muttered under his breath.

"*My point is* , you aren't any of those guys, and you shouldn't try be," Toby hopped down and vanished for a moment before swinging the fence gate open "You're Jim, and you've got to figure out how to be your own Jim the....ok I'm still working on badass nicknames but my point still stands!"

"I don't think Vendel and Blinky would agree with you there," Jim muttered, the five of them filing through the yard and into Toby's house "Claire you said your dad's going to pick the three of you up at eight?"

"Yep," Claire said "I can try to buy us some time but knowing my dad he's going to show up at eight no matter what,"

"We're just lucky gnome night coincided with Nana's chess tournament," Toby added "I just hope they take it easy on the gin and tonics, last time things got *real* ugly between them and the bridge club,"

"Perfect! Now I've got a whole hour and a half to figure out how I'm going to murder an innocent woodland creature, which *apparently* I need to do if I don't want to suck at this Trollhunter thing!" Jim flumped back on the couch with a groan. Dropping the still cheeping sack on the end table beside him. Each tiny noise deepening the gaping hole in his gut.

When he glanced up he saw Toby staring at him with an intense look on his face "This is really weighing on you, isn't it?"

"How can it *not*? " Jim dragged his hands over his face "I've never even set up a mousetrap, how can I hurt a gnome?"

Mary, Claire, and Darci stepped up to the couch, the four of them clustering in around Jim. Seeing the looks of gentle concern on their faces had him spilling his guts faster than any knife.

"It's not-- it's like-- it's one thing if one of Nana's cats gets a rabbit, or a coyote eats a racoon. That's just animals doing their thing, but this-- this gnome...he was just trying to live his life, sure he was a pain for Bagdwella but he wasn't *hurting* anyone. Just cause a I can crush him doesn't mean I should. This is the only life he's *got*! What right do I have to...."

His words started to shift into a roar, Jim shut his mouth to stifle it, scrunching his eyes shut and burying his face in his hands.

After a few tense moments Mary's voice broke the silence.

"Dang, you really were a mole scout weren't you?"

A soft thump and a yelp from Mary, no doubt Darci or Claire punching her.

Gentle pressure on his shoulder had Jim lowering his hands and opening his eyes, seeing Toby leaning down to pat his shoulder.

"You just sit back and take it easy for a moment, I'll...get some snacks, can't think with low blood sugar fogging your brain,"

Jim managed to nod in response, Toby nodded back, pivoting on his heel and striding towards the kitchen.

"Hey it's ok," Darci took a seat on the coffee table across from him
"You're empathetic, that's not a bad thing,"

"Apparently it is if you're supposed to be the Trollhunter," Jim muttered.

Claire folded her arms "Well then what are you going to do? Like you can't just leave him in the sack forever,"

Jim slumped back, with a groan, completely sprawled out on the couch "I know I know...I'm trying to think of something else to do besides killing him, but I just...."

He trailed off, thick uncomfortable silence settling over the room.

It must have lasted ten full seconds before Jim suddenly went stiff.

"Do you guys hear that?"

Mary glanced around "I don't hear anything?"

"Exactly," Jim scrambled to pull himself upright "Why'd the gnome get all qui--"

He froze when he saw that the end table where he'd set the gnome's bag down was now bare. The girls followed his gaze to the empty table and went still themselves.

At that moment a loud crash and yelp echoed from the kitchen.

The four of them jerked and shared a look, in an instant Jim was off the couch and on his feet, already charging towards the kitchen, the girls right behind him.

He burst through the door to see Toby scrambling up from the floor, dishes scattered all around him.

Jim darted over and reached down to help him to his feet, hearing the scuffle of sneakers on linoleum as the girls rushed in behind him
"Tobes what happened?"

Toby accepted his hand and pulled himself up "Oh man I'm so sorry guys, I was trying to finish the gnome--"

"You *what!*? "

"It's just-- you were so conflicted, and I thought I could take one for the team, so I tried to put him down the garbage disposal but then he got loose and--"

" *You mean the gnome's loose in your house!?* " Mary shrieked.

As if on queue an ominous chittering sound came from just behind the table, a flash of red in the corner of Jim's eye. Before he even knew what he was doing Jim was lunging towards the gnome, chairs crashing to the ground on either side of him, the gnome scampering out of reach and up the counter.

"Get it get it get it!"

This was bad this was bad this was so bad. It had been hard enough to catch the gnome the first time around, and now they didn't have swamp maggots or Blinky and AAARRRGHH to help. They *needed* to get him back *now* . The eighty minutes that had seemed like an eternity just a minute ago now seemed far too short. Nana might be legally blind but she wasn't stupid, at the very least she'd notice the pointy red hat. Oh god what if it got out of the house and someone actually *saw* it--

Claire grabbed frying pan and charged, the gnome jumping away onto the stove, the frying pan missing by inches, crashing down onto the counter with a deafening bang.

"Not the countertop!" Toby snatched the pan out of Claire's hands
"That's granite!"

At some point Darci had snagged the broom and was now using it to bat at the gnome left and right. She managed to knock it to the floor, sending him scurrying out of the room. Pointy red had vanishing around the corner.

"Don't let him get away!" Jim raced into the hall, ears trained on the sound of the gnome's chitters and scratching of tiny feet on the floor before the scratching abruptly stopped, but the chittering didn't.

He could hear the gnome cheeping and giggling loud and clear , which meant it was still close. But he couldn't hear its footsteps anymore. Which meant it had moved from hard wood to carpet, and carpet meant--

Stairs.

"It's heading upstairs!" he charged towards the staircase, taking the steps three at a time, hearing the gnome's cheeping ahead of him, shouts and thumping feet on the carpet behind him as the others scrambled to catch up.

"I've got the bag--"

"Cut off the exits we've got to corner him!"

Jim's head popped over the top of the stairs just in time to see the gnome scurry into Toby's bedroom. Jim bounded after it, pouncing to try and grab the gnome before it went under Toby's bed. He *just* missed it, the gnome vanishing into darkness and Jim's forehead smacking against the frame, sending the whole bed slamming against the wall with a bang. Toby shrieked but Jim barely noticed,

scrambling back, whipping his gaze around to try and spot the gnome.

"Shut the door don't let it escape!" Claire shouted.

Jim heard the door slam shut and latch behind him. Sealing the five--six of them in the room.

He willed his pounding heart to slow, had to be able to hear it. The door and window were shut tight, nowhere for it to run and only so many places to hide...

A tiny scratch of claws on wood had Jim instantly pivoting around and hurtling towards Toby's desk, yanking it away from the wall in a screech of wood on wood. The gnome peeped in alarm at being exposed, scurrying away as Jim lunged.

"Get it! Get it!"

Darci tried to stomp on the gnome as it raced past her. Claire threw a book and missed the gnome but hit one of Jim's horns. Mary grabbed a lamp only for Toby to snatch it out of her hands.

"Would you guy stop destroying my house!"

"Hey you were the one who let the gnome out in the first place!" Mary snapped.

"Well *excuse* me for actually trying to help!" Toby spat back "Unlike you guys I was actually doing something!"

"*Some help you were!* You let the stupid thing loose and--"

" *Quiet!* "

Jim's shout wasn't a roar but it was close enough to startle everyone into silence. In the back of his mind Jim felt awful about yelling and scaring them, but there was a *gnome* up *here* on the surface where gnomes and magic and trolls didn't belong and he needed it get it *now* before anyone saw it.

The only sounds in the room were four sets of breathing and Jim's booming heart. Jim forced his own breathing to slow, allowing him to hear just how quiet the room was now, no chittering or scurrying.

But wait, there was something else, some kind of soft crooning....

Instead of standing Jim sank lower, creeping across the floor, wincing at each little creak and clang of his armor. Following the cooing sound to the dollhouse, front wall swung wide open, in the corner.

Jim slowly crouched down to peer into the living room, blinking to confirm that what he was seeing was actually in fact real.

Ok. Whatever he was expecting, it wasn't this.

"Hey guys," he raised a hand to wave them over without moving the rest of his body "Come check this out,"

They all gathered in and crouched down low, peering into the dollhouse to see--

"Is the gnome slow dancing with that Sally-Go-Back doll!?" Mary whispered shouted.

In the living room of the dollhouse the gnome was indeed leading Sally-Go-Back in a slow waltz, crooning as he did. After a few moments he tenderly sat her back on the couch, picking up some felt flowers and getting down on one knee to serenade her with a ballad composed entirely of chirps and chitters.

"The mind of a vermin and the soul of an artist..." Toby said reverently.

Finally having enough of this as he could take, Jim rocked back on his heels "So yeah, that's a thing, we all saw that....."

"Really wish I hadn't," Darci mumbled.

"So..." Claire's gaze flicked back and forth between Jim and the dollhouse "If you wanted to...finish him...now would be a good time, while he's...distracted..."

Jim felt sharp tusks digging into his lip, gaze flicking back to the dollhouse.

Blinky and Vendel said a Trollhunter had to be ruthless. But that...that just wasn't who Jim was. And this gnome wasn't like a zombie or a rabid racoon, he wasn't a danger to anyone, he was a little man in a red hat that liked swamp maggots and hated being locked up. And

turned out to be pretty chill once he had a home and a doll to romance.

Maybe Toby was right, he had to learn how to be his own kind of Trollhunter. And if being the Trollhunter meant squashing destructive but innocent little creatures, well then maybe Jim was happy to be a lousy Trollhunter.

"Blinky said we had to 'take care of him' but what if we actually...take care of him?"

All four of them were looking at him now.

"So what are you saying?" Mary gestured towards the dollhouse "Just let him live here in Toby's room?"

"Well...yeah, he seems happy in there with Sally-Go-Back. And you were right Tobes, I gotta figure out how to be my own kind of Trollhunter, and I think this is a good way to do it,"

Toby folded his arms "While I am glad you recognize that I am in fact right about everything--"

"Not what I said." Jim deadpanned.

"I didn't agree to a new roommate!"

"What if you got to name the gnome?" Jim cut in, flashing Toby a grin.

Toby blinked, then looked back down at the dollhouse ".....ok I'm on board,"

"So I guess we're doing this...." Claire said slowly.

"Yep," Toby patted the roof of the dollhouse "Everyone welcome our new team mascot, Gnome Chompsky!"

Darci blinked "Ok that is the greatest possible name for a gnome,"

"See what did I say?" Toby puffed out his chest "I am right about absolutely everything,"

That statement got an eyeroll from Mary "What about the time you tried to clear the weeds out of your back yard by building your own flamethrower--"

" *Hey!* We all took a strict oath of silence surrounding the events of black Tuesday!"

Claire and Darci broke out into laughter, Jim found himself chuckling along with them.

Chapter End Notes

Epic the musical fans sound off, SIX HUNDRED STRIIIIIIKE!!!!

For anyone wondering nothing was burned during the events of Black Tuesday. However a lot lighter fluid was wasted and one of Nana's vacuum cleaners was absolutely destroyed.

A lot of people have already picked up on this, but Jim's journey to becoming the Trollhunter in this au will have some subtle but powerful differences from canon. Compared to canon Jim, Blinky, AAARRRGHH, and the rest of the trolls are gentler with his training, as they see him as a young child not a human of indeterminate age. Jim doesn't get the quick harsh lessons he got in canon, but this is better for him in the long term. Canon Jim was a literal twig of a person who had to learn how to grapple with rock monsters real fast, as bitter as it was he needed the tough lessons to stay alive. Sunshine au Jim on the other hand has a troll's natural durability, he can more or less "afford" to mess up because he can shrug off blows that would kill a human.

Furthermore sunshine au Jim needs the gentler approach because of his differing ideas towards violence from canon Jim.

Here Jim didn't get his "one hit" moment with Draal, but that's because he already had the one hit that changed him forever. When he broke Barbara's ribs as a young child.

So a big part of Jim's journey in this story will be coming to terms with his duties as a warrior, finding the balance between ruthlessness and mercy. Realizing that fighting and even killing his enemies doesn't automatically make him a violent monster.

And for those of you that follow me on tumblr, I just posted a poll you might find interesting....

Next time, September 16: Strickler has an after hours meeting with some of his coworkers.

Chapter 19: Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Have a good night sir, thanks for coming in!"

"Please the thanks are all mine," Strickler gave his most charming smile before rolling his window up, keeping it in place as he pulled out of the drive through lane.

Rather than his patronage, Strickler knew that the majority of the checker's good attitude lent itself to the crisp twenty dollar bill he had tipped with. Being a generous tipper did cause him to stick in people's memories, which could be a problem, and he most certainly didn't do it on every occasion. But certain things were more important than maintaining a low profile.

For example, his reputation as model citizen, who was always polite and tipped generously, had proved invaluable in the past.

And would no doubt do so again in the coming weeks.

He ate his meal with one hand, burger and fries with small soda, the other locked on the steering wheel as he drove out of town, keeping a careful watch in his mirrors as he pulled off the highway onto the narrow gravel road. Driving for a few more minutes before he reached his destination, pulling off to the side in a spot where the bushes were thick and heavy.

Someone dedicated could certainly find his car, but no casual commuters on the highway would spot it, which for tonight was all

the he needed.

Strickler silenced the engine with a sharp turn of the keys. Stepping out without bothering to lock it, there wasn't a car lock in the world that would stop a determined goblin, if experience was anything to go by it would only serve to tempt them. Sucking the salt from his fingers as he strode into the looming warehouse.

Bular had claimed the Vespa factory as his own nearly immediately after it was abandoned, and for the better part of four decades it remained the most reliable place to track him down. He'd even decorated to reflect his....Gumm Gumm sensibilities.

Strickler eyed the murals as he headed in, humans and changelings falling into various poses of subjugation and worship before their Gumm Gumm overlords, keeping the disgust off his face with years of practiced composure.

He understood, truly he did. Bular was the last of his tribe, abandoned on the surface cut off from his culture and his kin.

Changelings certainly didn't count

It made sense that he wanted to decorate his space to reflect the culture and the values he was striving to preserve. But for goodness sake if he was too much of a purist to use acrylic paint he could at least have one of the countless handlers Strickler assigned to him brew up some traditional war paint. Bular's *insistence* upon using his skills to decorate the warehouse resulted in the biggest health hazard this side of Los Angeles. But honestly Strickler could have forgiven all of that if it weren't for the simple fact that human blood made an awful art medium. Terrible adhesion, practically no pigment, not to mention the stench.

Strickler fought the urge to wrinkle his nose as he passed a mural that was far more mold than mural, already imagining all the spores settling into his sweater, only to quickly school his face into a mask of calm passivity when he heard raised voices coming from deeper within the building.

They'd already gotten started without him, good. Keeping his pace at a leisurely walk, Strickler strolled past discarded machinery and heaps of scrap metal, loafers nearly soundless against the concrete floor. Unbothered by the shouts and roars ahead of him getting steadily louder as he approached.

Strickler would be the first to tout the virtues of punctuality, but when it came to Bular any sense of etiquette came second to self preservation. Showing up late to a meeting ran the risk of making Bular impatient, and when Bular was impatient he became violent. On the other hand arriving first when Bular was already in a mood was a quick way to become an outlet for his fury.

As the raised voices ahead of him became clear enough to perceive what was being said, Strickler was pleased to find that he'd judged the Bular's mood accurately and timed his arrival perfectly. After Bular had already vented his frustrations on someone else.

He stepped out of the hall, trading narrow corridors for the vast manufacturing floor. Any equipment that remained was nearly unrecognizable, thanks to the ravages of time or Bular's own frustrations. Twisted into rusted, misshapen husks illuminated by whatever spotty moonlight managed to get through the grime covered windows. One of these husks had been battered into the shape of a crude throne placed against the back wall surrounded by more murals, these ones showing Gunmar in detail as he lead his hordes across the surface.

Before the image of the father stood the son in the living stone. Lips pulled in a snarl and hackles raised but jaw blades sheathed.

For now

"P-- please, our scouts are doing the best that they can," Gladys Groe stammered out "All of our agents are--"

"You're too *slow!*" the word was punctuated by Bular slamming both fists into the ground, rattling the ruined equipment and intensifying Gladys' trembling.

"While you impures waste time my father is rotting away in the Darklands," Bular barked *"Every second you delay gives the Trollhunter more chances to ruin our plans!"*

"Where are we in our search for the new Trollhunter?" Strickler asked as he strode in, no greeting, no introduction, straight to business at hand.

Multiple sets of eyes flashed angrily at him from across the room. Ms. Nomura. Officer Thatcher. Even Agent McCarthy taking some valuable leave from her position in the FBI to come here.

All the most significant movers of the order in the western United States.

Officer Thatcher leaned back against what must have once been an engine matching station "I've been using the goblins to arrange minor incidents to gain access to security cameras across town," his voice was steady, movements casual, relaxed, betraying none of the

frustration Strickler knew was bubbling just below the surface "But without intel on the Trollhunter's movements were operating blind,"

Strickler flicked his gaze across the room "Nomura, Gladys, what do you have to say about that?"

Gladys flinched and Nomura shot him a murderous look.

"We're working on it," she growled, one of her hands twitched. No doubt wishing for her scimitars, or imagining wringing his neck.

Knowing that she'd never dare to make such a fantasy come true, Strickler looked her dead in the eye and allowed a small smile to creep onto his face "Are you monitoring the entrances to Trollmarket at all hours?" he kept his tone light, almost teasing.

Nomura seethed but was wise enough to stay silent, while predictably Gladys took the bait.

"We can't do nothing but watch an empty bridge all day--"

"*Excuses!*" Bular slammed a fist into the wall, making the whole building rattle. Gladys, Nomura, and Thatcher all jumped at that while McCarthy just flicked her eyes lazily towards the ceiling, seemingly bored with this whole affair, but Strickler tracked the way her gaze never once left Bular, seething and roaring and working himself up into a tantrum.

"All you offer is *excuses!* Playing at your schemes while the Trollhunter traipses about--"

"We patrol the entrances every night!" Nomura shot back "But either the Trollhunter is using entrances we don't know about or he's getting in and out during the day,"

McCarthy threw back her head and let out a sharp bark of laughter, emoting for the first time since Strickler had entered the room "Moving during the day, how? With an umbrella?"

Bular's gaze flicked to McCarthy, expression wavering as he seemed to struggled to decide if he should be offended by her comment or not, before he could make up his mind Thatcher let out a scoff.

"A troll with an umbrella, because that's not going to stick out on security camera at all. I'm telling you Trollmarket's established a new entrance in the sewers. And if their little junior hunter is coming and going through there we need to have agents scouting the tunnels until we find it,"

"You expect me to wade through rivers of shit every night to try and find an entrance that may or may not be there!?" Nomura snarled, eyes flashing yellow.

Thatcher just shrugged "Pretty much yeah,"

Sensing violence was imminent, not that he cared if his subordinates spent all night beating each other bloody, but he did have a stack of tests in dire need of grading, Strickler stepped between them "Enough of the squabbling, let's go over what we know for certain about the Trollhunter,"

Nomura and Thatcher both scowled while Gladys cleared her throat.

"They're young, more than two centuries but less than three. Their combat skills are lacking, even for a youngster, but they're quick and so far have evaded direct surveillance,"

"Even if your average rock head doesn't know about security cameras this guy sure seems to," Thatcher added "We haven't caught so much as a glimpse of an elbow,"

"A troll that young being that cautious?" McCarthy strode forward, arms crossed "No way, he has help, older and wiser help. I think the traitor general finally decided to get off his ass,"

Strickler said nothing, keeping his face impassive as he listened to his associates passing ideas back and forth. But deep within his chest he felt a small flutter of satisfaction.

So no one else knew yet. Good.

"I'll crush that traitor's skull and use his bones to bludgeon that impudent whelp!"

"I'm sure you will," Strickler glanced over to Bular, noting the slight widening of his eyes and the slack of his jaw, speaking up again just in time to cut off the angry tirade he knew he was building to "There is no doubt in my mind that you will defeat the new Trollhunter when the time comes, so our efforts would best be served by gathering the means of your father's return,"

He snapped his head over to Nomura "As of right now you're off scout duty. Begin assembling the bridge, immediately. Coordinate with McCarthy to arrange transport of all bridge pieces to the museum.

Currently the only piece outside our control is the eyestone, which Otto is in the process of extracting,"

He looked up towards Bular "We need you to move into the museum full time. During the bridge's construction it will be most vulnerable,"

Bular growled, eyes narrowing, but his shoulders lowered "As long as the bridge is under my guard *no one* will impede my father's return,"

Stricker nodded once then turned to Thatcher "Arrange for Bular's transportation and accommodation, as well as...clean up," he made a show of glancing around the dilapidated factory floor.

The beginnings of a protest died on Thatcher's lips, quickly smoothing out his expression and giving a brisk nod of his head, but not quick enough to hide the gleam of excitement in his eyes.

Moving Nomura from scouting to bridge assembly should cool her temper. Gladys would rankle at being forced to shoulder the entirety of scouting duties but lacked the spine to do anything about it. McCarthy was no doubt polishing a dagger destined for his back, but Strickler felt reasonably confident she wouldn't attempt to plant it until after Gunmar's return. Throw the promise of some arson his way to keep Thatcher pacified as well as ensuring Bular's art projects wouldn't be splattered all over social media by some stray urban explorer. Strickler wasn't so naive to believe the next few months would be without headaches, but the worst of the troublemakers should be successfully corralled.

"Victory is close at hand but we can't afford to become sloppy. Stick to your assigned duties and keep your heads down. I'll keep an ear to the ground and see if I can't learn something about this young hunter myself,"

The meeting adjourned with mutters and grunts of assent, the group swiftly heading out of the factory and towards their respective vehicles. Bular crawling into the back of Thatcher's armored van.

Despite himself Strickler couldn't help but be impressed by human craftsmanship as the the van barely lurched under the weight of a full grown Gumm Gumm warrior. Driving smoothly away with barely a rustle of gravel.

Getting back into his own car, shooing the goblins into the back seat, Strickler allowed himself a mental pat on the back as he turned the keys in the ignition.

The Trollhunter did indeed have allies on the surface. And their existence and identities were known only to Strickler himself.

Granted there were still far too many unknown variables to make a move. He didn't know the exact nature of the relationship between the young hunter and his students. There was no evidence thus far, but Strickler was almost certain it was the aid of five teenagers that allowed the Trollhunter to move through Arcadia undetected. What his students got out of such an arrangement was a mystery. Knowledge? Magic? Altruistic satisfaction for doing a kindness towards a lesser creature...

Something uncomfortable shifted in his gut, Strickler smothered it before it could fully form. Shifting into gear and pulling back out onto the road.

He supposed it was youthful naivete on both parties part. The Trollhunter too young and bold to know to be properly cautious of humans, his students too drunk on modern fantasy media to realize

the danger.

It was unfortunate, and Strickler was sympathetic towards them, he truly was, and he fully intended to attempt to shield his students from the worst of the consequences of their actions.

But he'd spent centuries struggling to get where he was, fighting tooth and nail for every scrap of power he had. He'd sacrificed centuries of his life, the lives of countless allies, hours of work, and the ability to move his right shoulder without pain. Stricklander had given everything he had to earn the order and his people a place of respect and he wouldn't give that up for anything, not even for his students.

Shoving dark thoughts of what he knew was to come all the way down to his feet, Strickler put the car in gear and drove off into the night. The monster not hiding behind bushes or trees of the dark forest, it was driving behind the wheel of a 1986 Cadillac Fleetwood, crumpled fast food wrappers on the seat next to them.

Chapter End Notes

So Strickler knows that the kids are involved, but he doesn't know that Jim's the Trollhunter. A tiny but crucial piece of information that will absolutely affect Strickler's plans going forward. And Strickler does care about his students and wants to protect them as much as he can, but right now given the choice between his students and everything he's worked for as a changeling and the leader of the Janus order, Strickler would choose the order.

Bular setting up shop at the abandoned Vespa factory (and making murals with human blood) comes from the tie in novel *The Adventure Begins* by Richard Ashely Hamilton. As for Strickler's car....yeah sorry I know very little about cars, I just picked something oldish that looked similar enough to the shots we've seen of Strickler's car. So for those of you than know more about cars and are able to provide demonstrable proof that there is no way Strickler's canon car could be this make and model....yep you're right.

Sorry this chapter is so late, those of you who follow my tumblr might know already, but I recently got a second part time job on top of my full time one. This is very much my new normal going forward and not just a temporary thing, so I've decided to take a break from posting for a bit while I figure out how to work writing time into my new schedule without becoming burnt out. I'm still planning on posting my Halloween special fic in October (more about that in my tumblr), working on this story when I can over the next few months with the plan to start posting again next year.

Next time January 6: The Arcadia teens take a field trip to the museum, and end up learning a lot more than they planned on.

Chapter 20: Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Roller blades up five months later holding Starbucks

I'm back baby!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Jim ducked just in time to dodge a barrage of spears sailing over his head. Tucking and rolling out of the way of a blast of flame shooting towards him from the side. The tell tale clicking sounded ahead of him, Jim popping to his feet and yanking the sword off his back, using it to bat away the barrage of cannonballs another dummy shot at him.

Yep, 5am was way too early for this.

"To be an effective Trollhunter, you must always be afraid!" Blinky called out from behind him, projecting his voice to be heard over the various projectiles being shot in his direction "Fear heightens your senses! Fear keeps you alive! Arrogance gets you killed."

Jim jumped out of the way seconds before another training dummy could blast him with arrows, riddling a dummy behind him in a series of dull thunks "I..." he gasped for breath, blood rushing in his ears "I think that's one thing I've got handled, but what I don't get is how all *this*--" he replaced the sword on his back, gesturing to the training dummies surrounding him "Is going to help me against Bular,"

Blinky grinned and clapped his shoulder "To be an effective Trollhunter, you must be well versed in all forms of combat. One never knows what manner of battlefield they might find themselves in,"

"I don't think Bular's going to come at me with a flamethrower,"

"While I admit that possibility is...unlikely, Bular is a skilled, cunning foe," Blinky gestured to the dummy shish kebabbed by arrows "He has centuries of experience, and is known for being highly adaptive, able to utilize almost any environment to his advantage,"

Jim tried to swallow the lump that suddenly sprouted in his throat.

"To best him you will need to be adaptive as well," Blinky continued "Constantly aware of your surroundings and able to react, not only defensively, but offensively as well. And furthermore while you fear Bular, Bular does not fear you. He will be unafraid while you will be wetting your armor, that will be his weakness!"

Ok there at least five different things wrong with *that* idea. Jim opened his mouth to point out the many glaring flaws in Blinky's logic but before he could get a word out a soft click registered in his ear.

His body responded before his brain, darting two steps to the side, ripping the sword off his back and *throwing* it.

A silver flash and a dull clang of metal on metal. Jim blinked to see the blade had landed squarely in the dummy's chest, mechanisms inside it wheezing and shuddering before ultimately going silent, grinding to a stop before they could fire.

Something moved to his side, Jim looked up to see Blinky beaming down at him.

Despite how crazy this all was, trolls and magic and running around

dodging knives at ungodly hours of the morning, something in his chest swelled bright and hot at the look of pride in Blinky's face.

"I do believe it's time for the next phase of your training,"

"And what would that be?" Jim said slowly, walking over to pull his sword out of the dummy's chest.

He really hoped it wasn't something completely insane like 'trial by lava', he'd been eyeing that river of lava running underneath the forge ever since day one. Wait, was it lava or magma since it was technically still undergr--

"You are now ready to practice swordsmanship techniques, and engage in one on one sparring, AAARRRGHH if you would be so kind,"

Humming in the affirmative, AAARRRGHH stood from the side of the arena and lumbered towards them in all of his hulking, stony glory.

"Wait I have to fight AAARRRGHH!? He's like twenty weight classes above me!"

"Not to worry," Blinky gave another smile that wasn't nearly as reassuring as he probably intended it to be "AAARRRGHH is skilled enough to match you at your level without permanent dismemberment,"

AAARRRGHH nodded "Jim keep limbs,"

Were...were they joking or was that actually a thing with trolls? He wracked his brain to try and think of an excuse to not go toe to toe with a guy who could bench press a truck when something chimed beneath his armor.

Jim practically wilted with relief. Saved by the bell.

"Sorry gonna have to skip sparring today guys," he swung the sword onto his back, the magical magnets or whatever it was locking it into place, and started jogging towards the exit.

"Go? You can't go!" Blinky shouted after him "You're still behind on your training!"

"Sorry Blinky!" Jim was already halfway across the causeway "School's starting, can't miss my studies,"

Blinky sighed "I suppose not,"

Jim jogged the rest of the way out of Trollmarket and raced up the stairs. Shedding the armor and tucking the amulet into his pocket the second he reached the top. He grabbed his bike from the corner where he'd stashed it, Blinky wasn't a fan of him bringing it inside, convinced that it might clue other trolls in to his 'dual nature', but Jim put his foot down. If he left it outside and street sweepers or wandering punks stole it he'd be without a ride and down a good chunk of cash. So the bike came in. Tracing an arch in the stone and heading outside, stepping out of the crystal lit cave for the early morning glow of the sun on the concrete, shivering as he shrank back down to human.

After a quick glance to make sure the coast was clear, he did *not* need

to be flashing early morning commuters, Jim changed from his now baggy troll size clothes into his normal ones. Stuffing the spares in his bag, he hopped on his bike and started peddling towards school, with one important stop first.

Claire raised an eyebrow "Is that coffee?"

"Three sugar packets and four creamers," Jim said deadpan before taking a sip. Despite all the sugar and the cream it was still incredibly bitter, he didn't get why anyone would drink this unless they had to. Like he did.

There were packed on the sidewalk along with half the sophomore class, the other half would have their turn tomorrow. Mr. Strickler stood a ways ahead of them, waiting for the bus to come around.

"Dude do *not* let your mom know you're drinking coffee," Toby gripped his arm and looked him square in the eye "She doesn't even like it when you drink sugar free soda, if she learns you're partaking of the devil's bean juice she might actually hit the roof,"

Jim had to bite back a groan, of course, if mom learned he was drinking coffee she would totally flip. He had to make sure he never drank it around her and get rid of all the evidence before he came home. Just great, one more thing to worry about.

Mary scoffed "Don't worry about your mom, worry about the teachers,"

"Yeah you might get in trouble," Darci said.

"I was more thinking they might want some,"

"Are you *sure* three hours of sleep is enough?" Claire fixed him with a piercing look.

Jim's stomach gave a twist. No he wasn't. He'd known for a long time that he could get by on less sleep than most people, but lately he was stretching the limits of what 'less' meant. But Blinky had been pushing him to get more physical training in, and with Bular still skulking around town Jim didn't quite disagree.

What if Bular cornered him on his way home from school? What if he went after his mom or his friends? Jim had to be ready.

But between school and homework and troll language lessons after the only way he could get more time in the forge was getting up early and training in Trollmarket for a few hours before school. To pull off all of that something had to go, and that something was sleep.

"....yes," Jim said just a bit too slowly.

Toby folded his arms and raised an eyebrow "The giant coffee you're guzzling begs to differ,"

Jim opened his mouth but was saved from having to reply by the bus pulling around the corner, the crowd on the sidewalk surging towards it and pulling them along. He chugged the remains of the drink, lukewarm now, managing to toss the empty cup in the trash can before being packed on the bus, which was too crowded and noisy for further interrogation.

Ten minutes later they all unloaded in front of the museum, Mr. Strickler shepherding them to the front entrance where a dark haired woman with a badge reading 'Curator' pinned to collar of her magenta dress stood waiting for them, mouth stretched wide in a chipper grin.

"Welcome future scholars! Now I know contemporary media might lead you to believe European history is full of swords, sorcery, and scandal," she beamed at them, green eyes sparkling "I assure you the truth is far more interesting, and there's no better place to start than Renaissance era pottery--"

Jim could feel his eyelids growing heavy. One coffee might not be enough.

"Since we have limited time Ms. Nomura," Mr. Strickler cut her off "Perhaps it's best if we let them explore the museum on their own, don't you think?"

Mr. Stricker had barely gotten the words out before everyone scattered. The class quickly dispersed through the museum, everyone settling into their own groups. Jim allowing Toby to pull him off to the side where the girls were already waiting. Claire peeked over at the staircase "Medieval history is upstairs, maybe we should--"

"Actually can we check out the hall of gems and minerals first?" Toby piped up.

Claire frowned "The history section is the best place to get ideas for the set and costumes for the play, and we need to get those figured out by the end of the month,"

"Yeah," Darci added "Plus you know Mr. Strickler's going to give us a quiz about this later, we need to hit up history first,"

"Sorry Tobes," Jim patted his shoulder consolingly "Play ideas and test prep take priority here, we can check out the geology exhibit later,"

"Actually I want to see the mineral exhibit first,"

For a second no one moved; Jim, Claire, and Darci all slowly turning to stare at Mary.

She frowned at them "What? Didn't you hear me? Gemstones people!"

"Hang on are you guys actually..." Claire's gaze flicked back and forth between Mary and Toby "Agreeing with each other?"

"About rocks?" Jim said slowly, not quite believing what his eyes and ears were telling him.

"What?" Mary perched her hands on her hips "Minerals and gems means diamonds, rubies, and sapphires, what could be more interesting than that?"

"*Thank you*," Toby said "See guys, Mary here understands the important things in life, like crystals worth more than houses,"

Ok Toby and Mary agreeing like this was weird. Not trolls and magic weird, but 'weird' weird. More than that this field trip was supposed to be fun, a break from trolls and magic and weirdness and the insanity his life had become. The last thing Jim wanted was to get sucked up in bickering over what they should look at first. Time to take action.

"Compromise time," Jim stepped in the middle of them, making a 'T' with his hands "It's ten right now, lunch is at noon and we get back on the bus at two thirty. We spend an hour in the history section, take pictures for the play and everything, then another hour in the mineral exhibit. After lunch we can go back and check out anything we missed, sound good?"

Mary and Toby briefly shared a look before nodding in agreement.

"Sounds good,"

"Works for me,"

"Alright then," Claire moved towards the stairs, glancing over her shoulder to make sure they were following "Let's go,"

They headed upstairs, turning down the hall past the Egypt exhibit and the Dinosaur room into the medieval history section. As soon as they stepped in Claire made a beeline for a clear display case holding half a dozen brightly colored dresses.

"This embroidery's amazing..." she came right up to the display, nose inches away from the glass "I can't believe the museum was able to keep the original gowns in such good shape," she got out her phone and started snapping pictures.

Darci sided up to her, reading from the display card "Early 17th century England. That's the right time period, you could rock something like this as Juliet,"

Claire glanced from her phone to the dress and sighed "I can dream, with our budget I'll probably end up performing in a bathrobe,"

"Oh I wouldn't be so sure," Toby said breezily.

Jim glanced at him "What does that mean?"

"You know," Mary waved him off "All sorts of expected things can happen between now and the play's premier, maybe an unexpected donation to the budget..."

Darci stopped in her tracks and pivoted around, gaze swiveling back and forth between Mary and Toby "Ok, seriously, what's going on? You guys are up to something and I want to know what it is,"

Toby blanched "Oh-- well I, um...hey look at these!" he ran over to a series of paintings on the wall "These are new!"

Part of Jim was tempted to call Toby out on the fact that he and Mary were obviously hiding something. But if Toby and Mary were in cahoots with something maybe it was better if he didn't know, that way he could pass a lie detector test, and something about the painting Toby was waving at did snag his attention...

It was a mediievaly looking portrait of a red headed woman in a long dress holding a bundle, a second glance revealed that the bundle contained some kind of tiny creature with green skin, claws, and fangs.

He stepped closer, glancing down at the description card "The Pale Lady's gift?"

"Approximately late fifteenth century," Darci read the rest of the card "Part one of a series painted by an unknown artist, all featuring this 'Pale Lady',"

Glancing down the row of paintings Jim saw she was right, a row of medievally looking paintings all with the same red haired woman. Some were of her standing in the woods with more monsters, another showed her in white standing in front of a stone arch with the sun rising, or maybe setting, behind it, another standing in front of a castle next to a big guy wearing armor and a crown, either a knight or a king or both.

"I've never heard of this 'Pale Lady'," Claire said "Do you guys have any idea who she might be?"

"Nope,"

"Nada,"

"If you don't know I sure as heck don't,"

Jim gripped the velvet rope separating him from the painting, staring into the swirls of paint.

They were just paintings, old timey art. Nothing about them was super different from other paintings Jim had seen of dragons and princesses and unicorns. But something about these images stuck in Jim's head, some little detail he couldn't put his finger on poking at the back of his brain...

"I'm going to see if I can find Ms. Nomura, she might know more about these, be right back,"

"Ok,"

"Ask her if the museum has other gowns,"

"And ask her how many diamonds the museum has!"

With a quick nod Jim hurried off, jogging down the stairs and heading in the direction of the entrance. Maneuvering past the giant stegosaurus skeleton and weaving through the crowd milling in and out of the gift shop. He'd last seen Ms. Nomura near the front so that was the best place to start looking for her.

He had to find her, had to ask her about those pai--

"Long time no see *Lake*,"

Jim felt his stomach drop, immediately halting in his tracks and turning towards the source of the painfully familiar voice "What do you want Steve?"

Steve Palchuk smirked at him, pushing away from the column he was leaning against and swaggering towards him, looking smug as ever "I just wanted to let you know that Nuñez and I are doing a lot of practice for the play after you leave each day, pretty soon we'll be ready for the big smooch, on the lips," he said the last word with a pop.

"Yeah of course you are, because stage kisses aren't a thing," Jim grumbled.

Steve's grin dropped into a scowl "Get this straight Lake, I'm going to be the star of the show here, and on opening night, when I take my big bow after Claire gives me a big ol smooch," he leaned down, growling right in Jim's face "Everyone's going to realize what a little crybaby dweeb you are,"

Intestines in knots, Jim pivoted on his heel and headed back the way he came, chest feeling heavier with each step "Good for you Steve, let me know how that turns out,"

He'd just tell the others that he couldn't find Ms. Nomura or she was busy or something. He'd rather live with the mystery of the paintings than be within ten feet of Steve Palchuk for another second.

It wasn't the way Steve grated on his nerves, or the way he boasted about being involved in the play in a way Jim never could. The thing Jim couldn't stand was the guilt.

Sure he still didn't like Steve, probably never would, but he wasn't the problem he'd been before. He couldn't shove him around or trip him in the hallways anymore, not unless he wanted to get suspended again. Even if he was still the biggest dick in school. But despite how *Steve* Steve was the worst part was Jim knew he was the one who screwed up worse, and he still owed Steve an apology.

His stomach tightened even further. No, apologies were for stepping on someone's shoelaces or accidentally spilling their soda, what Jim had done was supremely fucked up.

The things he'd said to Steve last year...they crossed a line, those

weren't ok things to say to anybody. And Jim knew that he needed to look Steve in the eye and tell him that nothing he said about Steve and his dad was true, and Jim had only said what he knew would hurt the most. But every time he came close, every time he came up to Steve, words perched on the tip of his tongue. Steve said or did something that reminded Jim of how much a jackass he was and Jim ended up swallowing it back.

So here he was, six months later still stewing in guilt. And it looked like that wasn't going to change any time soon.

Besides it's not like Steve had ever apologized for breaking his j--

"Jim! Hey Jim! Wait up!"

Jim turned to see Eli rushing up to him waving his phone.

"You gotta check this out! I know you'll believe me,"

Oh great, more evidence of the Illuminati working out of the tea shop on main. Better just let Eli show him and nod along politely other wise he'll bug him about it for the rest of the d--

Jim froze, staring at the picture on the phone, blood running cold. It was a selfie of Eli with some *thing* on the ground behind him. The quality was pretty good, even if the subject of the photo was pretty messed up. Whatever it was it was clearly smashed. The majority of it's body had been pulverized into greenish goop onto the asphalt, but there were still a few identifying features. A spindly leg here, a pointy ear there.

His mouth went dry.

It had been well over a year ago, but there was no mistaking that creature, the same kind he'd stumbled across in the depths of the forest.

"So uhhh....what am I looking at here?" Jim had to fight to keep his voice even.

"It's a creeper!" Eli waved the phone in his face "They've been hanging around my house for months! And now I finally have proof!"

Ice filled his chest.

Creeper, hanging around Eli's house for months

Had to tell Blinky, Jim still didn't know exactly what those things were, but they weren't just running around the forest any more. There were *here*, in town. And he didn't know what they were, but he *knew* they were dangerous.

"Actually I'm pretty sure that's just a raccoon that got turned into roadkill, sorry, gotta go,"

Ignoring Eli's shouts of protest behind him Jim hurried off to rejoin the others. Forget the play and whatever Mary and Toby had going on. They had a bigger problem to deal with.

Chapter End Notes

So Jim may have gone through a bit more development in the

prequel, but he still defaults to his terrible coping mechanisms, ie. trying to shoulder everything on his own. (No Jim you can't just replace sleep with coffee, believe me I tried). It's ok to tell your troll dads that you're getting overwhelmed Jim!

And behind the scenes Mary and Toby's soiled hosiery to gemstone enterprise is taking off. They've made a few successful online sales and it's all gone to their heads already.

Where this story will be going forward. I've finally finished the training at my new job and have actual free time again, and I've successfully regained my momentum with writing this story. Going forward I'm going to try to get back into updates every four weeks. I'll work to maintain that pace but if it's not sustainable I'll make an announcement on my tumblr. And for those who follow my Owl House fic, I'm still working on getting my mojo back for that one, so updates TBD.

Next time March 17: The gang does their first Trollhunter mission as a group, but have they bitten off more than they can chew?

Chapter 21: Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"I mean it does look kind of similar..." Toby poked at the green blob with a stick.

"It's the same, trust me,"

Everyone else clustered in, eager to get a close look at the thing. Darci hung back, arms folded, all too happy to keep her distance. The 'creeper' was flat as a pancake with tire tracks down the middle, but there was a still a leg here, pointy ear there. Enough for Jim to recognize it from a photo.

"Goblin..." AAARRRGHH said with a low grumble, moving to Toby's side.

Darci bit her lip, glancing up and down the street for what was probably the twelfth time in five minutes. They were standing in the road right outside Eli's house. The sun had gone down less than an hour ago, but darkness fell fast. Even the glow of street and porch lights only seemed to highlight the shadows. Her stomach kept twisting up despite her attempts to smooth it. Sure it wasn't really *that* late, and no one in Arcadia really went out after dark, so chances of being spotted or running into trouble were pretty low. But being out in the open with all the trolls felt so...exposed.

And based on the way Jim wouldn't stop looking around in every direction every five seconds, he felt the same way.

"Goblin?" Claire looked up from where she'd been poking at the mess with a stick of her own "What are those?"

"Goblins are among the most deadly of vermin known to trollkind," Blinky stepped up to flank AAARRRGHH, face grave "Ruthless tricksters, petty street vandals who leave a wake of destruction wherever they go," he planted all four of his hands on his hips, glaring down at the road-killed goblin "This is not good!"

Darci fought to keep her breathing even. She knew this, she knew this already. Trolls were real, magic was real, all sorts of creepy crawlies probably lurked around after dark. But there was a difference between 'knowing' and standing in front of a creepy crawly's smashed corpse.

"Well hey, it's dead," Mary said with a shrug "Can't do anything any more, so let's get out of here and down to the library where we can--"

"On the contrary Master Mary, for every goblin you see, there two score you do not,"

Darci swallowed hard. Great, just great, more of these goblin things running around their town.

As if she didn't worry enough when dad went out on his shifts

"And as for the unfortunate soul who ran over this fellow...may Skaargen's swift blade have mercy," Blinky spat on two palms, rubbed both sets of hands together, and placed a fist over his chest, expression mournful.

"What do you mean?" Jim stepped up to him.

"Naturally, goblin vengeance is ten-fold," Blinky held up ten finger with all four hands.

Claire rolled her eyes "Of course, obviously,"

"Wait..." Jim's eyes widened "Are you saying whoever ran this goblin over is in serious trouble!?"

"Guys look!" Toby ran up to them from the sidewalk, Darci hadn't even noticed him wandering off "A delivery driver left a sticky note on Eli's house, their truck must have been what squashed the goblin!"

"Hey let me see that," Toby held out the note, allowing Jim to snatch it up, scanning over the narrow strip of pink paper "The driver's returning at at eight tonight," Jim looked up at them, a firm set to his jaw and every trace of anxiety gone "Which means we need to be here to, I'm not going to let some poor guy become goblin chow on my watch."

"Master Jim!" Blinky threw his arms out wide, fanged mouth spreading into a wide grin "Answering the call!"

"Stakeout!" Toby cheered.

Claire place a hand on her hip with a smirk "I could go for a little goblin hunt,"

"Meh," Mary shrugged "Why not, beats studying algebra,"

"Y-- yeah," Darci forced a grin "Let's get these goblins,"

Jim was right, they couldn't let an innocent person get hurt, and she wasn't going to let her friends face goblins alone, but that didn't mean wouldn't rather be anywhere but here.

Two backs of chips, six sticks of beef jerky, and an hour and a half of hunkering down in the bushes later there were still no goblins in sight.

"Oh man I'm so thirsty," Claire groaned from behind her "Why did you bring all those salty snacks and nothing to drink?"

"So our bladders are full right when the action starts going down?"
Toby's voice now "Rookie mistake,"

Darci held back a snicker without turning her head, keeping watch through a gap in the fence posts. Her dad had told her more than a couple of times that stakeouts were one of the most boring parts of his job, second only to paperwork. Watching street corners and alleys from his car for upwards of six hours just waiting for something that may or may not happen.

To be fair her dad did mention a solution to the bathroom problem that involved empty water bottles, but in the interest of preserving the innocence of her eyes, she wasn't going to bring it up.

"Snacks good," AAARRRGHH's voice, followed by the crunching of him munching on the plastic.

Darci shifted her gaze from the street to the cluster of bushes on the other side of it, where the other half of their group was keeping watch. Even in the dark across the street she could see Mary poking her head out, the silver glint of Jim's armor through the leaves.

From behind her the walkie talkie crackled to life "Hey guys, all clear on this end. How's it going over there?"

"All good in the hood, Trollhunter, except once we finish here we're in dire need of refreshment, too many salty snacks and not enough hydration. Other than that nothing unusual. WarHammer out,"

"Wait?" Claire now "When did we decide on code names?"

"I just came up with mine an hour into our stakeout, I think it fits,"

"Well if you're Warhammer, I'll be Queen Death Viper 5000,"

Darci bit her cheek to keep from laughing, about to tell Claire that her code name definitely needed some work, when she spotted a flicker of light down the road.

She reached back and snagged the walkie talkie, raising it to her face "The truck's here!"

In an instant everyone went silent, all holding their breath as the large vehicle lumbered to a stop in front of Eli's house. The driver, a youngish looking guy jamming along to whatever music was playing in his headphones, hopping out and heading around back to grab the package.

From behind her Darci could feel Toby tense, no doubt ready to jump out any second "Ok guys, we need to get the driver out of here before the goblins show up, so as soon as Jim gives the signal, we--"

A shadow moved over her, Darci tore her gaze away from the fence to see AAARRRGHH's resting on Toby's back, keeping him in place.

Glancing up, Darci saw that AAARRRGHH's face was grim, other arm raised to point at a street light at the end of the block.

Less than a second later that same light went dark, the sound of shattering glass echoing from across the street.

Darci's blood ran cold.

In sequence, all the lights across the street were extinguished. On the one directly across from them Darci caught a glimpse of spindly arms swiping down towards the bulb just before it was extinguished.

Lifting his hand from Toby, AAARRRGHH reached around all three of them, pulling them close as the night came alive with chitters and whispers.

Mouth dry, Darci found herself almost involuntarily pulled back to peering through the crack in the fence.

Dozens of red eyes glowed in the shadows, more and more and more with every second. With the lights out she couldn't see everything clearly but she could see enough. Round little bodies skittering around

on thin limbs. Creeping out from bushes and alleys towards the glow of Eli's porch light.

Goblins, they had to be. Not smashed up and pulverized, but very alive and *very* fast, moving with single minded purpose towards their prey. The delivery driver was surrounded and he didn't even know it, still rocking along to his music as he headed up the sidewalk to Eli's house.

Darci jumped when the walkie crackled with Blinky's voice.

"Great trouble! There appears to be far more than I had anticipated. Stay down and don't make a sound! In their frenzied state they'll attack any in their path!"

She swallowed hard, hands trembling against the wood of the fence.

AAARRRGHH pulled them closer.

Meanwhile the driver was ringing Eli's doorbell, the glowing bulb on Eli's porch of the only remaining sources of light on the street. The door opened to reveal Eli inside. The two of them spoke for a moment, she could hear that they were talking but was too far away to understand the exact words, especially over her own heartbeat booming in her ears. The driver passed Eli the box in his arms before stepping inside, Eli shutting the door behind him.

The last street light, the one directly above the truck, went dark. The chitters and whispers became louder, full on growls and howls. Goblins, dozens of them, poured out of the dark and scurried up the street, heading straight for Eli's house

Even if AAARRRRGGHH hadn't been holding her back Darci couldn't move, frozen in place peering through the fence, blood turned to ice and heart pounding wildly.

What to do, there was no way they could handle that many of them, even with Blinky and AAARRRRGGHH, the goblins would swarm them in seconds. But if they stayed put Eli and the driver were done for. Couldn't just sit back and do nothing, but going out there and facing the goblins themselves--

"Wait!" the walkie sounded again, this time with Mary's voice "The goblins aren't going after Eli or the driver,"

After a few seconds of watching with held breath Darci realized that Mary was right. The goblins were converging in the street, half the crowd already crawling over the truck, completely ignoring the house and the people inside.

"Yeah it doesn't look like the the goblins are after either of them," Claire said slowly "The goblins are going after the truck,"

It was true, the goblins were swarming the truck now, burying it in writhing green bodies, swaying back and forth under their combined weight, goblins all snarling and hissing aggressively as they tore at the truck with their claws. They were even saying actual *words* now, the occasional 'Waka chaka wa' coming up above the sound of tearing metal.

"Unexpected," Blinky on the walkie now "It appears their dispute isn't with the driver at all, but rather the transportation that had flattened their kinsman,"

"Kinda dumb but it works in our favor," she felt more than saw Toby

siding up to her, peering at the goblin covered truck through his own fence gap "The driver's probably gonna have to Uber home though,"

A heavy breath left her, ice vanishing and warmth rushing back in all at once, sinking down on her knees limp and boneless. Eli and the driver weren't in danger, that meant there was no reason to put themselves in danger. They just had to hang back until the goblins left and they would be home free. They didn't have to do anything and no one would get hurt. Still...

She glance back up through the fence. The entire truck was covered now, every speck of metal and rubber hidden, covered by writhing goblin bodies. Metal popping and whining as they tore it apart piece by piece. It reminded her of how piranhas could strip a cow to the bone in less than a minute. Seeing that go down ten feet in front of her, a swarm of goblins tearing apart a truck with their bare hands, with the thought that they'd nearly had to put themselves in the middle of that....

A full body shudder swept over her.

"All will be well as long as none of us become frightened," Blinky's voice crackled again "Goblins can smell fear, indeed they crave the pheromone of terror,"

Darci's heart shot right back up into her throat.

"I thought the first rule of Trollhunting was to always be afraid!?" Jim hissed from the walkie.

"Trolls, not goblins," AAARRRGHH rumbled.

"You're only telling us this *now!*?" Claire whispered frantically.

"They can smell fear!? This is too much!" Toby raised an arm and took a deep sniff of himself "Oh no I can smell it to!"

"Then stop or they will eat you!"

Darci couldn't get enough air, breaths coming hard and fast, she knew she had to quiet down but her body wouldn't obey. Heart in her throat, blood rushing in her ears and trembling all over. Could the goblins smell her now? How long until they caught a whiff and came after them?

If she tried to say anything she was only going to end up screaming, but Jim ended up putting it into words better than she could.

"Blinky we can't just turn fear off! If we could don't you think--"

"Too late!" Claire darted back with a yelp.

Involuntary, Darci found her gaze shifted back to the truck, or more accurately, what was left of it.

Ahead of them goblins milled about a pile of loose metal scraps in the road. Most goblins were still tearing at truck parts with their teeth, but several had turned away, perking up and staring at the fence.

Staring straight at them.

Darci's heart stopped, arms and legs turning to lead, mind going white. She could feel Toby scrambling back.

"Run dudes!"

Half of the hoard of goblins surged towards them, Darci still couldn't make her legs work but felt someone yank her to her feet. All of them racing away in a scramble of panicked shouts.

They took off down the street, goblins chasing after them, Darci recognized the person pulling her along as Claire. Jim, Blinky, and AAARRRGHH were running just a few feet ahead of them, but Toby and Mary were behind them with the gap rapidly growing.

And the goblins were gaining on them.

Jim turned back, opening his mouth to shout something, but before he could get a single word out AAARRRGHH ducked back, scooped them up with one massive arm and dropped them on his shoulders. A second later he snatched up Claire and Darci to, dumping them on his back and bounding ahead without even breaking his stride.

She dug her fingers into the mossy fur of AAARRRGHH's back, Claire was shouting something beside her and goblins howling behind them, hanging on for dear life.

With only three of them running now they were able to go much faster, but not fast enough to shake the goblins. Claws scratching at the pavement. Their hisses and howls and 'waka chaka's always just behind them.

"We need to find a refuge!" Blinky shouted "Trollmarket is too far!"

"Let's head to my house!" Toby hollered back "It's the closest and the smell of cats should cover us!"

"Right! Blink! AAARRRGHH! This way!"

Jim made a sharp right, running down a side street, Blinky and AAARRRGHH charging after him. The sound of goblin feet pattering on the asphalt behind them didn't fade, but didn't get louder.

Darci tightened her grip, trying to get her breathing under control.

It was ok, they were ok. AAARRRGHH had them, he would protect them, they would outrun the goblins and get to Toby's house were it was sa--

Angry snarls came from directly above her, Darci glanced up just in time to see a group of goblins jump down from a tree onto AAARRRGHH. And them. Grimy claws digging into her hair and shirt and a mouth full of sharp teeth just inches away from her neck.

A scream ripped out of her as she writhed and bucked, desperate to get the goblin off. The others were shouting and hollering to, frantically fighting them off while AAARRRGHH batted more falling goblins away. Mary grabbed one and threw it to the ground, Claire kicked another and knocked away the one on Darci's back. Toby yanked at one that was gripping AAARRRGHH's horn, tearing it free with both hands and throwing it to the ground.

AAARRRGHH pivoted around another turn, shifting his center of gravity and sending Toby off balance.

Her heartbeat stuttered, Darci knew what was about to happen but couldn't make herself move to stop it.

Toby toppled backwards with a wail, Claire and Mary whipping around and each grabbing one of his ankles, keeping gripping AAARRRGHH's mane in a death grip with their other hands while Toby screamed from beneath them, desperately trying to bat away the two pursuing goblins on the street.

"Get it off get it off *get it off!*"

Do something, their your friends, don't just sit there. Do something.

Darci managed to pry one hand free, reaching out to grasp Claire's arm. With the three of them pulling they were able to haul Toby up onto the relative safety of AAARRRGHH's shoulders and out of the immediate reach of the goblins.

Mary was saying something but she couldn't hear over the pounding of her own heart.

It's ok, you're ok, you're all ok--

From out of nowhere Darci found herself being lifted and dropped to the ground alongside the others. In two blinks she recognized their surroundings as Toby's backyard, with AAARRRGHH having dropped them over the fence. Jim and Blinky scrambling over on their own while AAARRRGHH just jumped, landing with a tooth rattling thud.

There was a flash as the burglar lights came on. The growls of approaching goblins turned to enraged hisses, but didn't disappear. Darci glanced over to see Toby and Claire standing at the door, Toby fiddling with his keys. In a second another problem hit her.

"Guy's AAARRRGHH is too big! We need to find another way--"

Toby finally managed to open the door and AAARRRGHH strode ahead without hesitation. As he came up to the door, one of his arms slid down with a bony pop.

Darci could only watch, hang-jawed, an expression she could see shared by Toby, Claire, Jim, and Mary as AAARRRGHH's shoulders and elbows jerked free of their joints, bending and contorting unnaturally, allowing him to *just* fit his body through the door, everything snapping back into place once he was inside.

"Come!" Blinky hurried over to the open door, he actually fit without having to dislocate anything "We must take cover!"

Darci couldn't move, still staring open mouthed, shock at seeing AAARRRGHH casually dislocate his entire body warring with terror of the approaching goblins.

Blinky waved again, more exasperated now "*Quickly now!*"

That finally spurred Jim at least into motion, pulling her up by the shoulders and rushing them all into the house, Toby slamming the door behind them.

"Upstairs guys!" Toby shouted "Don't worry about Nana hearing, she's going bingo hall hopping tonight with Phil and Jerry,"

Adrenaline still pumping, they all clamored up the stairs. It was a tight fit into Toby's room, AAARRRGHH popping his joints out again to fit through the door, Claire ducking under his noodle limp arm to run over and shut the blinds.

Then they were there, inside a house that didn't make her feel nearly as safe as it should, squished together with the trolls in a tiny room, goblin growls replaced with their own panting breaths.

Darci could feel herself shaking, so sure that any second goblins were going to break down the door and swarm them. Any second they would bust in and they were done for. The others looked almost as on edge as she felt, Toby and Mary pacing all over, checking the window and door over and over, Claire's chest was heaving with the force of her breaths. Jim was stone still, but based on the way his hair was prickled up and his eyes kept darting all around he was tense to.

But as the seconds crawled by no goblin attack came. No hissing or clicking of claws on wood. Their frantic panting dying down until the only sound was strained silence.

"I...I don't hear them anymore," Jim said at last "I think we're in the clear,"

Toby flopped back on his bed with a gusty sigh. Mary sinking down beside him while Claire slumped against the wall.

Darci could still hear her heartbeat booming, all her limbs were jello. She was barely able to make it to desk chair before her legs gave out beneath her.

That...that was terrifying. If they hadn't gotten away...

Claws in her hair and fangs inches from her throat

Her vision pulled in and out, gripping her knees to remind herself that she was in fact here and alive.

She never wanted to do anything like that *ever* again.

In front of her Blinky was pacing back and forth, he couldn't get very far thanks to how small and crowded the room was "I'm sorry to say Master Jim, but your town is infested with goblins!" he grabbed Jim with his upper two arms and shook him.

"Ok," Jim sucked in a deep breath and pushed away from Blinky "Ok ok ok, trolls I can deal with because at least they stay underground and in the dark-- wait does the sun burn goblins to?"

AAARRRGHH shook his head "Goblins prefer shadows, but not hurt by sun,"

Jim grabbed both horns with a groan that stretched out into a growl "Of course they aren't!" he snapped his head in Blinky's direction "All this troll stuff was bad enough, but I don't even have the bandwidth to-- there's just so many-- *urhgghgh!* What do you even want me to do here!?"

"Must find den," AAARRRGHH spoke up.

"Yes, and eradicate them at once before they seek their revenge!" Blinky balled all four hands into fists.

"*What!?*" Darci squeaked out "The goblins are going to come after us now!?"

"Yes, now that they have your scent, and know the location of Tobias' hut, it is only a matter of time until they pursue you as well. Goblins are no great intellectuals, but are single minded and ruthless in pursuit of their prey. Your only hope is to destroy their nest and scatter the horde, making the surviving goblins forgo their hunt in favor of their own survival,"

Darci made a sound halfway between a shriek and a whimper.

"Hey hey let's just chill here," Mary pushed herself to her feet "So we find the den, get rid of it, and our goblin problem goes bye bye. Easy. So where do goblins like to hunker down?"

"Haven't the foggiest," Blinky tapped his chin with one arm and folded the other three "Goblins are hardy vermin, able to endure the harshest of environments, and....endure..."

Blinky paused, stepping over to the dollhouse, AAARRRGHH following shortly behind him.

Through the window Darci could see Chopmsky presenting Sally-Go-Back with a doll plate full of crumbs surrounding a burning birthday candle, overall weird but pretty normal for Chopmsky according to what Toby had told her, looking up and giving a furious cheep towards Blinky that probably meant something along the lines of

'Mind your own business!'

"Great Gronka Mora! What is the *gnome* doing in this dollhouse!?"

Jim forced out a laugh "You told me to take care of the gnome, so...we're taking care of it,"

Blinky scowled, both of his right fists against his hip and top left one pointing an accusing finger at Jim "This is in direct violation of rule number two! Whatever happened to finishing the fight!?"

"And rule number one is to always be afraid-- except if you're around goblins 'cause they smell fear apparently, and rule number three is hit them in the gnards, which I'm pretty sure goblins don't have!" Jim snapped "Your rules make less sense than algebra, which, oh yeah, I have in a few hours, unless we all get eaten by goblins!"

Blinky bristled, four out of six eyes twitching, he raised a hand and opened his mouth, but before he could say a word AAARRRGHH put a hand on his shoulder.

AAARRRGHH gave Blinky a long look before turning towards Jim.

"Rules good, but learning in forge different from real battles, need to learn rules along with real fights, Jim also busy with human things,"

Blinky deflated, sighing and patting AAARRRGHH's hand with two of his own "My husband is correct, the three rules *are* crucial for a Trollhunter's training...but there can be difficulty translating academic lessons to practical experience. AAARRRGHH and I will take a more...practical approach to your training going forward, along with

accommodation towards your human life. We will seek out this den, wherever it may be, you just focus on your training and your studies,"

"Th-- thanks Blinky," Jim said with a sigh.

Blinky smiled back, before abruptly shifting back to a scowl "But a gnome in a dollhouse!?"

"Ok forget the gnome for a second, I have to ask," Toby stepped forward "What was that contortionist routine AARRRGHH pulled back there?"

"Yeah I was wondering about that to," Claire added.

"I wasn't gonna say anything, but I'm also pretty curious," Mary stepped up to Toby's side.

Three out of six eyes blinked in surprise "Ah, yes, I suppose you wouldn't know, being raised on the surface, but many trolls can dislocate and relocate their joints at will,"

"Help big trolls fit in small spaces," AAARRRGHH nodded along.

".....can Jim do that?"

"Tobes!"

"What? I want to know about all your troll superpowers!"

Blinky tapped his chin thoughtfully "There is an direct correlation between how large a troll is and how mobile their joints are. For smaller trolls dislocation and relocation are far more difficult, but in theory I suppose it could be possible for you,"

"Wha do ya say Jim?" Toby nudged him with an elbow "Want to give it a shot?"

"Dude no!"

"If it would help, AAARRRGHH or myself could initiate the dislocation process for you,"

"Hang on," Mary fished through her pockets "Let me get my camera ready--"

"Ok time out," Jim made a 'T' with his hands "There will be no dislocating any more joints tonight!"

"Actually," Claire cut in "I can pop one of my pinkies in and out at will,"

"Perfect!" Blinky grinned "A human control! Now we have a comparison to--"

There were more words said but Darci tuned them out, voices turning into static in her ears. Nails digging into her knees so hard they were nearly breaking the skin, anything to keep from screaming.

We could have died tonight and you guys are talking about AAARRRGHH popping his arm in and out!?

She could still see the gnashing teeth, hear the growls, goblins snapping right on their heels.

Tonight had been the second time they were in real, *actual* danger. The others didn't seem to be bothered by it, but Darci was *done*. She wanted to go back to video games and poker nights, popping into Trollmarket after school for trollish lessons and getting back home before dark without anything trying to kill or eat them.

But deep down she knew that wasn't going to happen, and felt awful for even wanting it.

The others clearly didn't want to quit this Trollhunting stuff, and Jim didn't get to. The five of them were a team, and she couldn't just dip out and let them face life or death danger all alone. Which meant that as much as the thought terrified her, she was going to be in the thick of the danger right along with them.

Mary said something, Jim scowled and the others all laughed.

But the others weren't freaking out like she was, so maybe the problem was her, maybe she was just a coward who needed to toughen up and be a team player

Darci's insides twisted in on themselves, if it weren't for the fact she hadn't had any of Toby's snacks earlier she knew she would have thrown up.

Chapter End Notes

So AAARRRGHH casually dislocating his everything to fit inside human houses is a nod to the original Trollhunters book, where trolls had this ability which they used to fit into narrow spaces, though I don't think I did the body horror justice. It makes sense for a primarily subterranean species to evolve this ability, cave ins are going to happen and trolls need a way to squeeze free. I understand why the show didn't include this (animation budget + hardcore body horror), but realistically the trolls should have broken far more doors.

And this won't ever come up in the story, but due to Jim being a smaller troll/human hybrid, he can't dislocate and relocate his joints the way larger trolls can. The only echo of this ability he has is a much lower risk for permanent damage from a dislocated joint. So his rotator cuff is good to go, but he's not squeezing into any vents.

Out of the whole group Darci is very much the most timid one, this is mostly for two reasons. Inherently she's just not a bold person, and her lived experience as a black teenage girl who lost her mother to violence (The last thing Louis wants is for what happened to her mom to happen to Darci, so he's taught her from a young age to always listen to her instincts and stay safe no matter what). So she gets a lot more freaked out by magic and danger than the others. And there's certainly an argument to be made that Darci has the most rational view of these situations, and the others aren't freaking out nearly as much as they should be, but topic for another day.

Coming April 14: The kids manage to track down the goblin nest, but is it a good idea to explore it without Blinky and AAARRRGHH? (No it is not)

Chapter 22: Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"You totally killed it at doge ball today! Have you considered going pro?"

"And eliminate what little free time I have? Hard pass,"

"Seriously, you didn't get hit once," Toby tucked the last of his gym clothes away and shut his locker "What's your secret?"

Normally gym class was a game of 'How can we survive whatever cruel and unusual punishment Coach Lawrence decides to put us through today', and while the argument could be made that dodge ball certainly fell into that category, few things in Toby's life up until this point had been as profoundly satisfying as seeing Steve trying and failing to hit Jim with a dodge ball over and over again. Getting progressively redder and redder until by the time Jim had finally hit him out with a fast ball his face was the color of a beet.

Toby wished he'd been able to take a picture to immortalize the historic moment.

Jim huffed a laugh while pulling on his jacket "Forge training, when you're used to dodging flames and spears rubber balls are nothing."

"Makes sense..." Toby said slowly.

That sounded...hazardous. Coach Lawrence might be a hardass, but

even he'd never bust out the medieval weaponry, if only because it wasn't in the school's budget, plus he'd probably get sued. But still, couldn't argue with results.

"Think you could talk Blinky into letting me go a few rounds in the forge?"

Jim frozen midway through tying one of his shoes, slowly raising his head to stare at him "Uuuuuuuh, why would you want that?"

"To turn into a fitness god that's why!" Toby plunked down on the bench, stretching his arms out wide painting a picture of the future "Can you imagine, *me*, scaling the rope in record time. Doing sit up after sit up while the whole school watches in awe!"

Jim was getting fit and tough for his Trollhunting gig, which was great, Toby was happy for him, but he could be happy for his best buddy and want a piece of that fitness mojo himself.

And if being able to juggle dumbbells and kill it at dodge ball made Steve cry, that was just an added bonus.

Jim laughed again, dropping his fully laced foot to the ground and pulling up his other one "Ok, I'll talk to Blinky, but don't say I didn't warn you,"

"Much obliged," Toby reached to pull on his own shoes, only to pause when he felt the buzz in his pocket, getting his phone out and frowning at the notification "I have to compensate somehow since those goblins stole my chubby tracker. And because the location hasn't changed the company doesn't believe it was stolen and refuses to send me a replacement!"

"Wait," Jim slid over to him, looking over Toby's shoulder at his phone
"The battery on your tracker is still going?"

"Yep, charged it just before we left for our stakeout,"

"And the location's still on!?"

"Yeah wh--"

Out of nowhere Jim grabbed his shoulders shook him "Toby if the battery's still going and you have their location, that means--"

A lightbulb flashed on in Toby's head.

"We can track down the nest,"

"I want it on record that I think this is a bad idea,"

Claire rolled her eyes "We know Mare, you've said it like six times already,"

"Quiet guys," Jim whispered, pulling his hood down low "We're supposed to be keeping a low profile, remember?"

Toby glanced back, wincing at how clearly on edge Jim was. The five of them going to Trollmarket at night was one thing, walking around town was something else entirely. Thanks to the extra-extra big and tall section at Walmart, Jim had jeans and sneakers that actually fit him and a hoodie that went over his horns. Anyone looking out their window or watching security cameras would only see a really big guy, not a troll or anything that necessitated calling animal control.

That was also why they were doing this after dark, on foot, sticking to shadows and side streets. Currently walking single file through a narrow alley instead of the main road which was faster and much more direct. But when a member of your party was a troll stealth took priority, giant hoodies aside.

But still, the way Jim kept fidgeting and glancing around, completely different from the easy confidence he'd had while dominating dodge ball this morning, he was clearly out of his element.

Toby turned back to his phone, making sure they stayed on course of the tracking app. All this just meant it was important that they finished their mission pronto. Get in, get the intel, get out.

Darci rubbed her arms, glancing from side to side "Are we getting close?"

"Almost there," he lifted his head and risked a peek out of the alley, it opened up to a park so he had to make triple sure the coast was clear "Only three hundred yards away,"

He darted out of the alley to the first large tree at the edge of the park, waving the others forward.

One by one they all hurried out to join him, Jim racing across the six

feet of open space and diving into the bushes in a blur. From there Toby followed his phone app through the park, sticking to the cover of trees and bushes and zig zagging across open areas. Making slow but steady progress towards the blinking red dot.

"Remember the plan guys," Jim said, voice low "This is just a recon mission, we find where the goblin nest is, then report back to Blinky and AAARRRGHH,"

"Got it," Darci gave a curt nod.

"Alright," Toby glancing back and forth between his phone and the shadows ahead "The goblin nest should be right...here!"

He shove aside the bush ahead of him, revealing the wretched hive of scum and villainy lurking in their town.

"Huh," Mary said, tilting her head "Not where I expected a goblin nest to be,"

"Yeah Toby are you sure your tracker is right?" Claire glanced between his phone and the building ahead.

"Positive. I calibrate it every week using Meow Meow PI, this thing's accurate within ten feet,"

Jim raised his hood slightly "The museum? How could a goblin nest be here? I think someone would have noticed goblins hanging around the neanderthal exhibit,"

"Maybe they're in the basement or something?" Claire added "Hiding from people in the archives?"

Jim let out a shaky breath "Whatever, it doesn't matter, we found the nest so let's get back and--"

"Oh no!" Mary shoved past them, pointing frantically towards the main entrance "Look!"

They all whipped their heads over to see the same thing Toby did, the perky curator he remembered from their field trip--

"Class be sure to thank Ms. Nomura for taking the time to guide us today, she's a close personal friend who's dedicated her career to caring for these artifacts,"

Striding up the front steps into the museum, none the wiser to the goblin filled death trap she was walking into.

Toby shoved his phone into his pocket with shaking hands "She's gonna be goblin chow! Or worse, get eggs laid in her ears!"

"Maybe it's like Claire said, the goblins are just hanging out in the basement," Mary said slowly "She probably comes and goes from the museum all the time, she hasn't been attacked by goblins yet so it probably won't happen tonight...right?"

"Yeah," Darci piped up, voice a full octave higher than normal "Plus since goblins smell fear and she doesn't even know they're there she won't be afraid so they'll leave her alone!"

All very rational points Toby wholeheartedly agreed with, Ms. Nomura was fine, she probably wouldn't get mauled or have eggs laid in her ears. He turned to Jim to tell him that they should book it back to Blinky and AAARRRGHH so they could come back with goblin repellent spray, only for his heart to instantly drop into his stomach when he saw the look on his face.

He recognized that look.

"If there's a chance goblins might hurt her I can't risk it, you guys just hang tight, I'll go in and--"

"I'm coming with you," Toby stepped up to his side "If you're going into a goblin nest you'll need someone to watch your back, and your ears,"

"Make that two someones," Claire added "Even though I'm pretty sure goblins don't reproduce that way,"

"Actually three," Mary stepped up to Jim's other side "And don't bother trying to argue, you've never won a debate with me and you're not going to right now,"

"And the heck I'm staying out here alone," Darci mumbled.

"Then it's settled," Jim rose to his full height, pulling his hood down low "We have to go in and check it out for ourselves, if Ms. Nomura isn't in any danger we retreat and tell Blinky and AAARRRGHH about the nest, if she is we get her out of here,"

They dart over to the side of the museum, sticking to the shadows. Jim reached up and forced open a window, Toby couldn't help but wince at the sound of the latch breaking, boosting them up one by one before leaping in himself, landing in a crouch.

Less than a second after he touched down the amulet flew out of his pocket, hitting him in the chest and armor materializing in a silver flash.

For a moment all was quiet.

Toby glanced around uneasily, they'd only been in the museum a couple days ago, but it looked completely different. All tall shadows and dark silhouettes, making the building seem much bigger than it actually was. Toby couldn't see clearly more than five feet ahead of them. Which meant that goblins or museum burglars could be lurking six feet away and he'd never know until it was too late. The silence was the worst part, instead of footsteps on marble and the buzz of chatter it felt like the whole building was holding its breath. Something crouched and waiting to pounce deep in the dark hallways, biding its time until they were in too deep to get away.

Toby was in it till the end, but man he wished the museum was a lot less creepy after dark.

Claire was the first one to take a cautious step forward "So where should we start?"

Mary moved up to join her "First off, no splitting up, *ever*. Second we should keep following the tracker and find the nest itself. If it's in the basement or the archives or something we can dip out without telling Ms. Nomura or getting busted for breaking and entering...a third time,"

"Hey at least it's not my house," Jim grumbled "But that sounds good, let's go,"

Slowly but steadily they crept deeper into the museum, footsteps quiet as possible and always on the lookout. Toby kept alternating between scoping their very dark and spooky surroundings and keeping an eye on the tracker on his phone.

Out of nowhere Jim rushed ahead and blocked their path "Ms. Nomura's just up ahead," he pointed at a lit room at the end of the hall.

And risk of being caught aside it was nice to see a lit room with another person inside it, a reminder that they weren't completely alone here.

"We can't let her know we're here unless we absolutely have to, otherwise the goblins could smell her fear,"

Claire stepped up to Toby's side, alternating between glancing at Nomura and peeking at his phone "Toby how close are we?"

"Really close guys," Toby whispered "According to my phone we're practically on top of it, it might be in the basement, we should try to find some stairs and--"

Something green and goopy appeared on his screen, burying the red tracking icon behind a haze. Toby blinked, another glop appeared right next to the first.

Stomach sinking with the feeling he was about the be *that guy* in a horror movie, Toby slowly raised his head.

When he was little he'd watched a nature documentary about frogs. How they started as tadpoles living in a pond before growing legs and moving to dry land, returning to the water to lay their eggs in one big gigantic gelatinous mass at the bottom of the pond.

What he was looking at right now reminded him a lot of that. Only instead of the bottom of the pond it was on the ceiling of the museum, and instead of frogs suspended ten feet above his head, slimy and bug-eyed but overall harmless unless you licked them, it was a large mass of very *not* harmless goblins of varying sizes embedded in a mass of green slime.

"Uh guys...I think I found the nest,"

He raised a finger and they all looked up. He could pinpoint the exact second they each spotted the nest when they all recoiled in disgust and horror.

"Oh ick," Darci gagged.

"How has no one noticed this..." Claire muttered.

"Ok that is *not* in the basement," Jim kept his eyes locked above them "I'll create a distraction to keep the goblins busy, you guys get Ms. Nomura out of here,"

"How are we supposed to do that without sounding crazy!?" Mary hissed.

"I don't know, maybe pull a fire alarm or something..."

Ahead Toby caught a glimpse of magenta through the open doorway, Ms. Nomura pulling something from a crate and carrying it to the side of the room out of immediate sight, but the bright light still cast a her shadow on the wall where he could see it. He opened his mouth to shout, either a warning to her or an alert to the others, but before he could get a word out he saw something that caused his voice to wither and die.

The shadow on the wall *twisted*.

For a second he thought his eyes were playing tricks on him, that the dark spooky museum was messing with his head, but as he continued to watch, stomach shrinking further and further in on itself, it became clear that they weren't. Her shadow's limbs stretched out into something angular and sharp, the sound of joints crackling echoing through the hall. Her shape shifting and bending in ways no human body was supposed to move. Morphing into something both inhuman and terrifyingly familiar.

In a sight that made his blood run cold, the figure that stepped back out into the light of the doorway was a lean, vicious looking troll. Poison green eyes, gleaming magenta stone skin, and Ms. Nomura's same dark hair.

Toby was so stunned he forgot how to move, nearly leaping out of his skin when he felt a hand on his shoulder "Toby," Claire's voice whispered in his ear "I...I saw that to, what is--"

Something yanked them both to the side and pulled them down to the floor, Toby was about to scream when he saw Jim motioning for him

to be quiet, Darci and Mary huddling down in the corner with them, a pair of goblins scampering down the hall where they just were a few seconds ago.

"The-- the-- museum lady," he managed to stammer out "She-- she's a *troll!*"

"What!?"

"What the Hell!?"

"*What!?*"

Mary scowled "I don't know what you think you saw--"

"I saw it to!" Claire hissed "She...shapeshifted somehow, one second she's human the next--"

"Aren't you the clever ones,"

The five of them whipped their heads around en masse, Toby's heart shooting up into his throat when he saw Ms. Nomura towering over them, even taller than Jim, eyes glowing over a wide, nasty looking grin.

They all screamed and dashed away in the one direction Nomura wasn't blocking, ducking past hanging curtains into the next room. Jim hung back, planting himself between them and Nomura, who followed at a leisurely pace. Drawing his sword and pointing it

straight at her "K-- keep back, I'm warning you!"

Nomura just cackled "So the Trollhunter is working with fleshbag brats? That's something I haven't seen before, cute..."

Jim charged her, swinging his sword down only for Nomura to effortlessly catch the blade between her palms, smirking at him.

"Wha-- what are you?" Jim stammered.

Her grin widened, exposing a mouthful of needle sharp teeth "You don't know? You really are a child,"

Without warning she flipped the sword, and Jim, over her shoulder, slamming him into the ground.

In that second Toby forgot all about the goblins, the shapeshifting killer troll museum curator, all of it. All he knew was his best buddy was in trouble.

He charged forward with a yell, Nomura whipped around and caught him in the stomach with a strong kick. Sending him crashing through a stack of boxes and knocking the air from his lungs.

Stars flashed in his eyes, his chest ached, Toby could barely tell up from left but he still tried to scramble back upright, this was no time to be laying around. His vision cleared enough to see Claire running at Nomura with a wooden plank, only for Nomura to knock her away with an effortless backhand.

Jim rushed back in, sword raised and a snarl on his face. Nomura just laughed, ducking and dodging past his swings effortlessly, vicious smile not so much as twitching

And Jim never got a single blow in.

Someone, Darci, pulled him free from the pile of boxes and yanked him to his feet "What do we do? Jim's getting creamed out there!"

"We gotta give him back up," Toby squared his shoulders, eyes locked on Jim and Nomura's clash "On three we rush in, one--"

A group of goblins skittered out in front of them, hissing aggressively and cutting them off from Jim.

Darci shrieked and kicked one away.

Toby lunged forward with a yell, tossing aside goblins left and right. But now matter how many he tossed away it always seemed like two more appeared, leaping down from the ceiling and from behind the crates, hissing and snarling. There never seemed to be an end to them, though he did manage to yank his Chubby Tracker of one of their necks.

Suddenly the goblin in front of him vanished with a yelp and flash of wood. He looked over to see Claire holding a wooden plank like a baseball bat.

Claire kicked a shard of wood, a piece of a broken crate, in Darci's direction, who picked it up and used it to knock away another lunging goblin "We need to get out of here! There's too many goblins, and

Jim's outmatched!"

The clang of metal on metal had Toby glancing over, heart dropping into the pit of his gut.

Nomura, now wielding a set of curved, glowing red blades, was slashing relentlessly at Jim. Jim was on the backfoot, only defending and no attacking. Nomura growled, speed picking up until her blades were moving faster than Toby's eyes could track, but every now and again he heard the shriek of sword skating across metal.

Where Jim had failed to block and the armor had taken the blow.

Out of nowhere her swords snagged his and *yanked*, sending Jim staggering off balance, leaving him wide open for a powerful kick, knocking him into the wall.

Toby's heartbeat tripled, booming in his ears. Claire was right, Jim was way out of his element, and more and more goblins kept pouring out. They needed to do a tactical retreat *now* before--

His blood went cold, a chill shooting up his spine.

But they were outnumbered *and* surrounded, how could they even get away!?

Leaping onto crates and offsets in the wall, Nomura pounced, gravity giving her downward swing extra power, Jim barely managed to raise his sword in time to block. Clang of metal on metal echoing through the room as she crashed into him, sending Jim slamming back against the wall.

Darci was yelling something, but Toby was already racing towards them.

Jim was on his back now, no space to retreat, it was all he could do to block Nomura's blades with his own.

All rational thought consumed by adrenaline fueled fury, Toby grabbed Nomura's hair and *yanked*.

It had the desired effect of making Nomura ease off, glancing over her shoulder with a snarl, giving her torso a powerful twist, sending Toby crashing into a display podium. Pain exploding in his chest and air slammed from his lungs, forcing him to loosen his grip.

Trying to power through the throbbing ache, oh yeah he definitely had a broken rib or three, Toby forced himself back upright to see Darci and Claire right behind him, still running interference with the never ending swarm of goblins.

One dug its teeth into the shard of wood in Darci's hands and hung on tight, digging in harder the more she swung, forcing her to toss it away with a shriek "Where the *hell* is Mary!?"

Toby grabbed whatever it was on the podium, which looked like some kind of viking helmet, and tossed it at a charging goblin, knocking it back "I don't know! She couldn't have gone far--"

"Get it off me get it off me get it off me!" Mary sprinted towards them, screaming and thrashing under two goblins clinging to her back and arm.

Toby ran forward, managing to yank off the goblin on her arm and toss it away.

"Mare duck now!"

Mary ducked down, exposing the goblin on her back and allowing Claire to knock it off with a wide hit from her plank, sending the goblin skidding across the ground landing just behind Nomura who--

Toby's heart stopped.

Jim was huddled on the ground, breathing hard, half tangled in a fallen tapestry. Nomura towered above him, cackling.

"This was fun..."

Jim raised his sword only for Nomura to knock it away, sliding across the stone floor.

"All that fancy armor and you're just a frightened whelp,"

She raised her blades high.

Toby knew he should shout, help, do *something* to help. But it was too far and too many goblins between them, leaving him to helplessly watch as his best friend was--

Jim's expression shifted, so subtle Toby almost missed it. Anxiety evaporating away and a calculating gaze in his eyes.

Instead of rising to meet her blow Jim reached down and *yanked* on the tapestry, sending Nomura staggering off balance, crashing onto the goblin behind her with a splat.

In an instant the entire museum went silent, the goblins around them all froze, no hissing or clicking of claws on marble.

Nomura pushed herself upright with a groan, smashed goblin remains smeared all over her shoulders and back.

The goblin closest to her narrowed its eyes and growled, picking up a stray marker from the ground and rising to stand on two feet, the other goblins surrounding it mirroring its actions.

That's when Toby remembered, goblin's *always* got payback when one of their own was killed. And didn't always connect the dots about who the real culprit was.

"No!" Nomura scrambled back on all fours, eyes wide and frightened.

The lead goblin hissed, uncapping the marker and swiping it across its face "Waka chaka!"

Suddenly the room was alive with dozens of goblins echoing the cry of '*waka chaka*'.

"No! It-- it wasn't me--" Nomura tried to retreat further but she was penned in by the crates at her back and the goblins at her front "No--no!"

The goblins surged, completely ignoring Toby, Jim, and the girls and heading straight for Nomura. Swarming her in an instant, bright magenta vanishing beneath a writhing mass of pale green. Nomura screeched in terror, thrashing and squirming in a desperate attempt to free herself, but the goblins were piled on too thick.

Abruptly a hand on his arm yanked him away from the sight.

"Come on we gotta go now!" Darci shouted "There's no telling how long they'll be distracted!"

That snapped Toby out of it. Booking it back down the hall the way they came with the others. Nomura's screams and the goblins' howls echoing after them. Jim darted ahead and practically ripped the window open, waving them through.

Toby's sneakers hit the grass with a grunt, barely able to remember to dart out of the way so Mary could land where he just was. Frantically glancing around.

Which way should they go? He'd gotten all turned around and had no clue which roads were where or what the best escape route would be. The goblins were going after Nomura now, but for how long? And was that all the goblins or were there some stragglers lurking around. What if there were more of them not caught up in a revenge frenzy? Or worse more of those weird shapeshifting tro--

Something grabbed him and Mary around the waists, smushing them against each other squeezing them tight, and took off lightning fast.

Toby nearly screamed before he realized that it was Jim that had grabbed them, Claire and Darci under his other arm. Sprinting away from the museum.

They were moving so fast his surroundings were a blur, Toby was able to catch glimpses, leaves here, brick there, through the corner of his eye he spotted the flashing red and blue of police lights, but Jim didn't slow down, and Toby didn't want him to. Racing away from danger further and further into the night.

Chapter End Notes

And it will be clear in the next chapter, but the kids were able to avoid being caught by the police here. With Jim grabbing them and running they were able to get away before the cops showed up.

The fight scene between Jim and Nomura was the first time Jim ever seriously fought against a troll his own size (Draal and Bular are much bigger with fighting styles that lean into their size/strength), and highlights what Jim's biggest weakness right now is. He's fighting like a human. Nomura might not have the size/strength of larger trolls, but she takes full advantage of her own strengths. Her speed, her agility, jumping up onto a higher vantage point so when she leaps down gravity will give her swings more power. Using her long, digitigrade legs to get powerful kicks in when she spots an opening. In contrast, Jim just swings his sword around.

Granted the difference in skill between him and Nomura is so vast he can barely keep up with defense, never mind go on the offensive. But even still Jim didn't even attempt to use his trollish agility to try to help him evade or attack from a different angle, favoring using his sword for all his attacking and defending.

Jim may have a troll's strength, but he'll never reach his full potential until he learns to think like a troll, and fully utilize his troll physique in combat.

Next time, coming in late May: The kids regroup with Blinky and AAARRRGHH to share what they've learned, and Nomura has an uncomfortable conversation with her boss.

(Sorry about the vague date for the target update, my work

schedule is pretty insane this spring. In my defense my boss used the magic words, 💎💎incentive pay💎💎)

Chapter 23: Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"...so I grabbed everyone and ran all the way here,"

Claire held her breath, gaze fixed across the table trying to gauge Blinky's reaction.

There was a creak as Blinky's top two hands tightened around his mug, lower two gripping the table, eyes darting all over the place. In contrast AAARRRGHH hadn't moved an inch, face completely blank, but not in a neutral way. More like he was keeping himself in check.

After grabbing them Jim had booked it to Trollmarket, making it all the way to Blinky's library before setting them down. In about two seconds they realized that Blinky and AAARRRGHH weren't there. Jim had wanted to run off right away to find them, but at the rest of them insisting, more specifically Mary screaming, they'd all taken a few minutes to catch their breaths before heading out. After a bit of searching they found Blinky and AAARRRGHH having drinks at some kind of troll pub, once all the panicked 'what are you doing here's were out of the way they gave them a rundown of everything that had happened at the museum.

Which brought them here, waiting in tense silence for Blinky and AAARRRGHH to say something.

"So!?" Toby threw his arms out "What's up with the weird shapeshifting troll lady at the goblin nest!?"

AAARRRGHH snapped his head down with a sharp glance at Blinky, muttering something in trollish, too low and rapid for Claire to pick up.

Blinky slammed his mug down on the table, firing back a stream of trollish at AAARRRGHH. They were using some weird dialect but Claire was able to catch the words 'danger', 'unclean', and 'youthful', but in this context it might mean 'too young'--

"Come on guys!" Mary whined "You know we don't know enough trollish to keep up when you get all--"

"Changeling." AAARRRGHH said solemnly.

The second the word left his lips all sound in the pub stopped. No clinking glasses or muttered conversations, every head and eyeball in the room turning in their direction, a cold prickle running up Claire's spine at the sudden scrutiny.

Blinky choked out an awkward laugh before grabbing AAARRRGHH by the beard and yanking him down to eye level "Some *discretion* if you would," he glanced around at all the trolls in pub staring at them "Carry on good fellows, nothing to see here, just...education on tragic events of the distant past,"

The heavy silence persisted for a few more seconds before the six armed bartender turned and started refilling the mugs in their hands, sound slowly creeping back into the room as everyone went back to what they were doing before AAARRRGHH spoke. Claire forced her muscles to relax, easing into her seat, but kept her ears trained on any and all stray bits of noise.

Most trolls didn't know that they were all learning trollish, and people

tended to say lots of things around you when they thought you couldn't understand the language.

"Uhhh..." Jim was sitting up ramrod straight, hackles raised and clearly uncomfortable "What's a changeli--"

"*Lower your voice!*" Blinky hissed. Flicking his top four eyes all around, he waved them in with his top two arms.

Claire scooted up as much as she could on the stone bench, the others moving in alongside her, all of them clustering in tight.

"Changelings haven't been talked about openly in quite some time and..."

Abruptly Blinky glanced over his shoulder, a red troll with wide curling horns standing just behind him.

"Do. You. *Mind!*?"

The stranger snorted and turned to walk away "Whatever,"

"In the old world, Gumm Gumms stole young trolls from their tribes and--" Blinky cut himself off again, glaring across the table, the red troll having just moved to AAARRRGHH's other side.

Ten seconds of Blinky staring daggers into them was all the stranger could take "Fine." he-- not he they, gendered pronouns were only for trolls you've been introduced to, stomped away. Heading out of the

pub with all of Blinky's eyes watching them. Only when they'd stepped out did Blinky continue.

"These stolen whelps were then...changed," his voice dropped to a hoarse whisper "Warped by obscene magics gifted to the Gumm Gums by the Eldritch queen herself. Their sole purpose, to spy on the world above,"

"What exactly did they do to them?" Claire whispered, leaning forward practically hanging halfway across the table "And who's this Eldritch Queen?"

Blinky's expression tightened, AAARRRGHH shooting him a sharp look.

"These young trolls were...altered," Blinky said haltingly "Given the ability to withstand the sun and adopt a human form, trained to be ruthless spies and assassins. As for the author of these foul magics...that...that will be discussed later in your education,"

"Wait so these changelings can turn back and forth between human and troll!?" Jim's voice jumped up an octave.

"Yes and such things are rarely discussed openly, so please--"

"Does that mean that I--" Jim swayed in his seat, hands shaking with the force they were gripping the table with "With me-- and how I-- I-- *oh god*, what if I--"

The grind of stone on stone and a flash of motion was all the warning Claire had before Blinky practically leapt across the table and slapped

two hands over Jim's mouth "*Silence yourself at once!*"

For a few seconds none of them moved, Blinky's gaze darting around in every direction. A few trolls in the pub were looking at them but in more of a 'why are humans so weird' way instead of 'deeply taboo subjects being shared with outsiders' way. Eventually Blinky pried his hands off of Jim's face and settled back next to AAARRRGHH "We will discuss this at length in the future in private," he kept his voice low, even from just across the table Claire could barely hear him "Just know that as certain as I am that the sun will rise, you are not of that breed. Now not another *word* on the matter whilst we're in public."

Jim sagged, a gusty exhale leaving him, clearly massively relieved, but Claire was still keyed up.

"Ok then, so what's a changeling troll lady doing running a museum?"

"I...I think I might know why,"

She turned to see Mary set her phone on the table, sliding it to the center.

"I spotted this right before the goblins attacked us, I thought I recognized it from the illustration in ABR so I took a picture,"

All of them leaned in to peer down at Mary's phone and the photo pulled up on it, Claire included.

Despite being taken in a dark room it was a pretty good picture, Mary had used three months worth of allowance to upgrade her phone to one with a top of the line camera. A partially assembled stone

sculpture set up in one of the museum's side halls, surrounded by large crates, some of them open and empty, probably where the parts of the sculpture had come from, but some still sealed up. No doubt containing more stone blocks. And even half finished the overall shape of the sculpture was weird, curved, a half moon maybe?. It almost looked like a--

Two wires clicked in her brain and Claire actually felt her heart stop, mouth going dry and skin on the back of her neck prickling up.

It wasn't a sculpture, it was a *bridge*. And not just any bridge.

The bridge with a whole chapter of ABR dedicated to it, including a highly detailed illustration spread across two pages.

The only thing keeping all the big bad human eating trolls locked away.

Kilahead bridge.

"Gorgus preserve us..." Blinky whispered. Above his shoulder AAARRRGHH's face went gaunt.

"Oh man oh man this is bad," Jim gripped his horns "Like goodbye Arcadia bad!"

"Nomura must be rebuilding Kilahead," Claire pushed herself up against the table "That's why she's set up in the museum! She's passing it off as an exhibit!"

"Rebuilding, gathering all the pieces of the bridge would take decades, centuries even!" Blinky picked up Mary's phone, gripping it tight holding it close to his three left eyes, oblivious to the look of horror on Mary's face "But changelings are nothing if not resourceful, and their ambition knows no bounds. Their presence in Arcadia, working in collusion with Bular and goblins, the reconstruction of Kilahead...this is troubling indeed."

"So what's our game plan here?" Toby jumped up on the bench, eye level with Claire "If they're reassembling Kilahead that means they want to let the rest of the Gumm Gumms out, we've got to stop them!"

"Kilahead won't work if all the stones aren't there, right?" Claire looked up at AAARRRGHH, who gave a single nod back at her.

A wide grin broke through the panic on Toby's face "Then all we have to do is bust back into the museum and steal one of the bridge stones, and their plan is over. World saved!"

"That...might be tough," Jim plucked the phone from Blinky's hands and dropped it back into Mary's waiting ones "Goblins aside, Nomura might beef up security at the museum, if we try to sneak in again the cops will be all over us, we barely got away from them tonight,"

"Then we go in during the day," Claire lowered herself back down to sit on the bench "No trolls or magic, just some normal teens learning about history,"

"We'll need a distraction," Toby dropped back into his seat "Just leave that to me,"

Mary raised an eyebrow "You thinking Operation: Silent Night?"

"I think Operation: Hopper might be the best way to go,"

"But where are we going to get that many crickets on short notice?"

"Ok no crickets here!" Jim held up both hands "And since when are you guys making all these secret plans?"

"Hey we have lives outside of Trollhunting," Mary said with a flick of her hair.

"Yeah but since when do you leave the rest of us out of them?" Claire shot back at her "Are you guys dating?"

Both Mary and Toby visibly recoiled.

"What?! No way!"

"While I am offended on how quickly you answered that, I can confirm we are not going out,"

Claire crossed her arms with a scowl "Fine. Don't tell us."

Mary winced "Claire..."

"Can we please get back on the topic of Kilahead bridge being rebuilt and the evil trolls possibly escaping it!?" Jim pushed himself between

Toby and Mary, glancing around pleadingly "Even if we get in during the day, depending on how big the stones are we might not be able to--"

A loud sob cut him off, startlingly loud even in the crowded tavern. Claire whipped around to see Darci crumpled on the table, face buried in her arms, doing very little to muffle her cries. Across the table Mary's and Toby's eyes went wide, Jim's jaw was hanging open in stupefied shock and both Blinky and AAARRRGHH looked equal parts concerned and uncomfortable.

Seeing her best friend so distressed made Claire's heart clench. She scooted closer across the bench "Darc what--"

In a flash Darci snapped upright, sending Claire whipping back, her face blotchy, eyes red with tears streaming down "*We could have died!*"

"Darc--"

"The goblins could have killed us! The troll lady could have killed us! *Bular could have killed us!*"

Recovering from her shock, Mary reached over to her "Hey it's ok, we're safe here now--"

Darci shoved her off "It's just too much! Bular and all those goblins-- an-- an-- and that changeling troll lady! I just-- I can't do this any more guys!"

"Whoa whoa whoa," Toby scooted closer to her "No need to freak out, Jimbo wouldn't let anything--"

"We had to fend off the goblins on our own!" Darci shrieked, Toby jerking back "He was too busy fighting with the crazy changeling lady, they could have bitten us to death, we could have *died!*"

Jim's face was stricken "I-- I'm sorry I-- I was trying to look out for you and I just--"

Just like that Darci slumped onto the table, sagging like a puppet with its strings cut, face buried in her arms sobbing away.

By now every troll in the pub was openly staring at them, even the bartender, unbothered by the glares from AAARRRGHH and Blinky's attempts to wave them off.

But that didn't matter, what mattered was one of Claire's best friends in the world was having a complete breakdown.

Keeping her motions slow and deliberate, Claire slid closer, gingerly wrapping an arm around Darci's shoulders. On her other side Mary did the same, the two of them encircling her.

Claire squeezed Darci as hard as she dared, wanting to let her know that her best friends were here for her but not quite sure she was in the mood for a bear hug right now.

This...wasn't just a tonight thing, this had been brewing in Darci for a long time, now it was just coming to the surface. As her sobbing continued, if Mary and Claire were making her feel better it wasn't showing, Claire felt her throat tighten. How...how had she not noticed? How upset Darci was getting, how scared. Sure things got a little crazy but they handled it just fine. Sure there were a lot of

goblins tonight, but they did ok fending them off--

But what if you didn't

Sure they'd had AAARRRGHH's help getting away the last time, and with Bular they'd had Jim running interference. But if they'd had to deal with it alone Claire was sure they could have handled it. There were five of them, seven with AAARRRGHH and Blinky, they could handle anythi--

The clearing of a throat grabbed her attention. Looking up across the table to meet Blinky's pained gaze "Perhaps it might be better if the...human component of our group took on a more supportive role,"

Claire's actually felt her breathing stop for a few seconds.

The four of them sidelined, forced to step back as the bigger stronger boy took center stage. No. They couldn't. She wouldn't just let herself be shoved to the side like a--

"Wha-- but you can't just bench us!" Toby sputtered "We're a team! Come on Jim tell them!"

Jim didn't say anything, head hanging low, all she could see were the curves of his horns on top of indigo hair.

"Go on Jim, tell them we're just as much a part of team Trollhunter as you!"

A deep rumble from AAARRRGHH pulled her attention; all three of them looking up at him.

"Many ways to help against Gumm Gumms," AAARRRGHH rumbled
"Learn strategy, keep watch on surface. No need for ones who can't fight to go to battle,"

A hot flush shot through Claire from head to toe. She wanted to fire back with a composed, rational retort as to why this was completely unfair, but if she opened her mouth the only thing that would come out was an indignant shriek.

Those who can't fight

"This is bogus!" Mary snapped.

"Yeah we can hold our own just fine!" Toby stood up on the bench, whipping his glare back and forth between Blinky and AAARRRGHH
"Sure we're not as badass as Jim, but if we just trained a little we could--"

"Maybe they're right."

In an instant they all went silent, the only sound at the table Darci's snuffles as they all slowly turned to look at Jim.

He had finally raised his head, fanged mouth twisted in a grimace, the look on his face sad and deeply guilty.

Claire's stomach dropped to the floor, Darci didn't react just kept on crying, on her other side Mary stiffened. Across the table she could see Toby working his jaw open and shut in shock.

"B-- but we're a team!" he stammered "We're in this Trollhunting thing just as much as you, you can't just..."

Somehow the look of guilt on Jim's face got ten times heavier "Guys...when we go out and face goblins or monsters, I'm not worried about getting hurt, I'm worried about *you guys* getting hurt. I can get slammed around and walk if off, if one of you guys gets hit--"

His voice cracked "I...I try to do my best to take point and make sure you don't get hurt, but I'm...I'm *terrified* that one day I'm not going to be fast enough or strong enough and one of you gets..."

He tailed off, tense silence filling the air. None of them having the guts to say what Jim hadn't. Until AAARRRGHH did it for them.

"Jim gets hit gets back up," he rumbled "Humans get hit and get hurt bad. Not something can be changed with training or studying."

In an instant the white hot indignance burning in Claire's chest snuffed out.

No one was saying that the rest of them weren't as smart or as capable as Jim. The fact of the matter was Jim was more *durable* than them.

She swallowed back the ashes of her protests and continued to pat Darci's shoulder "Ok, we'll take a step back, stick to research and daytime recon,"

Mary was still stiff on Darci's other side but she nodded along "Yeah, what Claire said. No more goblins or fighting,"

Toby sat silently for the longest time, but eventually he nodded to.

Still looking sick to his stomach, Jim reached over and patted Darci's hand "And don't worry about the bridge and the museum," he said gently "The four of us can handle that,"

"N-- no I--"

Darci scrambled upright, pushing off Claire and Mary's hands, sniffing and rubbing her face with the side of her arm "I can handle museum stuff during the day, just...just not all the dangerous stuff,"

"We can discuss the specific roles you will assume at a later time," Blinky pushed himself away from the table and stood "But before any battle plans can be made Vendel must be informed. And you five must rest, not only did you escape certain death tonight, you are well overdue for some sleep, come."

They all stood followed and Blinky out of the tavern and down the street, AAARRRGHH bringing up the rear.

But instead of heading to the stairs, Claire realized they were heading back to the library.

"Hey Blinky the exit's that way," she pointed a thumb over her shoulder "If we want to get home and get some Z's we should turn

around,"

Blinky looked back with a smile "That is where the surprise I've had planned for you for comes into play, and I can think of no better time,"

Toby recoiled "Please not another saga recitation!"

"My ears are still ringing from the last one!" Mary wailed.

Blinky sputtered with indignance "I'll have you know you should be so privileged to hear the entirety of the Battle of Bone Canyon in its native dialect! But no the surprise is something else," he gestured to the library's open door with all four arms "Right this way!"

Curious now, Claire darted into the library a few steps ahead of everyone else. Only to find the library exactly as they left it. Blinky came in with the others, stepping ahead of her into one of the smaller study rooms. Claire followed after him to see--

"Hey am I crazy or was that door not there the last time we were here?"

"Indeed it was not. I made arrangements with the neighbors and gained use of this space," Blinky stepped over and pushed the door open, smile wide and eager, gesturing for them to go inside.

Jim headed in first, Claire right on his heels, she could hear the others right behind her. When they were all inside and Claire could finally move past Jim she stepped ahead to get a good look.

The new room was smaller than the library proper but bigger than any of the side rooms. AAARRRGHH could definitely fit but he'd have to do his dislocation thing to get through the door. But unlike the library the room dwarfed the books instead of the other way around, only one bookshelf with a single crystal lantern on top against the wall near the entrance. The space was roughly triangle shaped, narrowest at the doorway and widening up in front of them. On the far side of the room against the widest wall there were five shallow depressions in the floor. All of them were lined with...stuff. That was the best way to describe it. A random assortment of dish towels, bath towels, blankets, curtains-- wait was that fur in there!?

Moving closer, to the second depression from the left, Claire inspected the patch of orange poking out between a stripped bed sheet and a flower print curtain.

Yep that was a fox pelt alright, if the shape didn't confirm it the white tip sure did. As she looked she saw more furs of various shades; sandy brown, thick black, occasional flash of white--

"We've prepared this space in case any or all of you need a place to rest from your training...or a sanctuary to remain in Trollmarket for an extended period of time,"

Claire turned back around. There was a nervous edge to Blinky's smile now, wringing both sets of hands standing in the doorway.

"Wait a second is this a room for....all of us?" Mary said slowly.

From over Blinky's shoulder AAARRRGHH smiled and nodded "Yes, place for humans to be safe,"

"Indeed it is, a safe, private space that you may all rest from studies and training, with a nest for each of you to sleep in. I know humans require a great deal of sleep. If you wish to rest here tonight before heading home, you are welcome,"

Jim looked from Blinky back to the fur and fabric lined hollows
"....how do you guys feel about crashing here for tonight?"

"I'm down, it's past midnight and I'm wiped, so I could go for a few Z's before heading home,"

Toby strode past her towards the hollow in the middle, turning around and flopping backwards onto the pile.

He shifted this way and that on the pile of furs and towels, expression turning contemplative, then satisfied "Yeah this kind of rules, though I'm not a fan of the tarp,"

"Heck I'll take it,"

Jim strode forward, reaching down as Toby lifted the tarp up, blue martial crinkling. Off to the side Mary and Darci were inspecting the hollow on the far right.

"...this could work," Mary said slowly

"Hang on are we actually considering sleeping here tonight?" Darci's voice was even, red rimmed eyes the only trace of her earlier tears.

"Why not? We could use a nap, and a place to hunker down safe from goblins until sunrise," Mary shrugged "Give Jim all the tarps and hand towels, hang up some of the curtains for changing areas, and we've got the perfect club house!"

Claire let their chatter fade to background noise, kneeling down and slowly running her hands over the fox fur. It was soft, thick and warm, the thought of napping on a pile of these sounded heavenly.

The idea of sleeping over in Trollmarket hadn't crossed her mind before, but Claire wasn't opposed. And the idea of having their own hang out space down here was growing on her more and more.

A club house; somewhere in Trollmarket they could hang out without worrying about being stepped on or stumbling into a fire hazard. A library full of trollish books full of magic and ancient myths just a few feet away, no fussy babies or parents to nag about chores and studying....

She spun around, practically bursting with giddy energy "Blinky this is great!"

"You...like it?"

"Like it? We love it!" Toby pulled himself up from his hollow, passing a curtain to Mary "This place is totally awesomesauce!"

"Yeah!" Jim flashed a fanged grin "It'll be nice to have a place to crash down here,"

Mary lifted the curtain this way and that, sectioning off one of the

hollows from the others "Some modesty curtains here and there, some Christmas lights, and this place will be perfect!"

"We could get a spider plant and a lamp for it..." Darci said, an excited grin slowly but surely spreading across her face "Maybe even a peace lily!"

"AAARRRGHH and Blinky help," AAARRRGHH said with a slow nod.

Beside him Blinky was positively radiant "I'm so glad you enjoy it! We worked very hard to make this space habitable for human striplings,"

Tarps and blackout curtains weren't exactly comfy, and it would be fine for a night or to, but sleeping in a round depression in the ground long term would be murder on their backs. But there was no reason to rain on Blinky's parade, besides, they could sort out the sleeping materials and bring a few cots down here later.

"Thanks Blinky," she smiled at him "We really appreciate it,"

Somehow Blinky's grin widened even further.

"Thanks again for checking in,"

"No problem," the police officer tipped his hat with a smile "You just watch out and don't trip over any more silent alarms,"

Nomura forced out a bubbly laugh "Will do, you have a good night,"

"Thanks, you to," the officer gave perky wave, that Nomura forced herself to return as the officer headed back to his car where his partner was waiting, easing the museum side door closed behind him.

The second it latched shut she dropped her hand and her grin.

That was fucking stupid.

Nomura was no coward, but no changeling started a fight that they didn't stand a good chance of winning, and she certainly wasn't an exception. The new Trollhunter, just as young and inexperienced as their intel promised, stumbling into her lap with a gaggle of human cronies. While it had been more than a little shocking to see the Trollhunter working with human kids it wasn't like a bunch of pubescent fleshbags actually mattered. It should have been easy to beat the little junior hunter bloody and drag them to Bular. It *was* easy, the brat barely knew how to swing his sword and the goblins had been keeping the humans busy. She'd had the hunter on the ropes without even breaking a sweat.

Her molars ground together painfully, heels snapping against the marble floor.

Only for the hunter to pull a fast one and sick the goblins on her, and even worse, trip an alarm on the way out. Nomura was barely able to pull herself free from the goblins and shift back to human in time greet the arriving police officers. Doing her best to laugh off the situation as being clumsy and accidentally setting off the alarm by

tripping over a box.

Thankfully they'd bought it and left without a fuss. If this had been treated like a full on break in word would have made it back to the precinct and Thatcher, the sadistic prick that he was, would have thrown her under the bus.

Or more specifically, at Bular's mouth.

Thankfully Nomura had been able to avoid that outcome, now she only had to deal with pissy goblins, a massive mess in the bridge exhibit, and her own wounded pride on letting an uppity whelp and their human sidekicks get the better of her.

Reaching said mess at the Kilahead exhibit, shattered crates and smashed goblin remains smeared over torn down tarps scattered on and around the half finished stone arch. It almost looked like an explosion went off. And of course, she couldn't exactly delegate cleaning this to the human custodians.

An upturned crate blocked her path. Resisting the urge to kick it across the room, she squatted down and lifted it up, moving to set it alongside the wall.

A full deep cleaning would take days, but hopefully she could get this under control enough to get out of here before midni--

"Trouble with burglars?"

In an instant her already sour mood turned rancid.

Whipping around she threw the crate with all the force she could muster.

A raised eyebrow, half a step to left, wood shattering harmlessly against a marble column and green eyes staring at her with cool amusement.

"Temper temper dear,"

Nomura growled.

Perfect, just fucking *perfect*. Talk about the absolute last thing she needed tonight.

"Why are *you* here!?" she spat.

"Can't I be worried my fellow changeling's well being?" he strode towards her, running a finger along the edge of a crate, voice dripping with faux concern.

Nomura had to bite back a harsh bark of laughter. Worried? Not fucking likely.

"Well no need to lose sleep," she bent down to pick up another crate "Trollhunter was here, he got away, bridge is fine," she strode to the side of the room and set it against the wall "You can go now,"

She moved to go grab another crate only to jerk back when she saw Stricklander only inches away, expression flat but glowing eyes piercing through her.

"I find it difficult to believe that one of the order's top fighters could lose to a stripling with only months of training,"

Forcing back the urge to flash the glow in her own eyes, Nomura sidestepped him, making a beeline for an upturned crate "He got lucky, sicked the goblins on me,"

"And you lack your own luck?"

She tore down a stained tarp "Fuck you,"

Stricklander didn't even flinch "If you're incapable of safeguarding the bridge there are plenty of capable agents who would be happy to take your place. And we always need more boots on the ground scouting,"

Those words stopped Nomura dead in her tracks, frozen bent halfway down reaching for the crate, blood reaching a boil. In that moment she wanted nothing more than to throttle the smug, arrogant bastard, even though she knew he'd cut her carotid before she got close.

How dare he. How *dare* he. Switching her back to crawling through the sewers all night so chumps like Gladys and Thatcher could take her place!? Not on her fucking life! Nomura wasn't going to stand by and let herself get screwed over, and she hadn't risen high in the order just by cutting off heads and kicking teeth in.

Any changeling worth their salt knew that the right bit of intel was

more deadly than any blade.

Snapping back up and pivoting on her heel, Nomura stared Stricklander dead in the eye "The Trollhunter didn't get away on their own, they had help,"

A single eyebrow arched "Oh? Did their trainers accompany them?"

"No. *Human* help."

Stricklander didn't react, face a neutral mask.

Nomura wished she'd gotten a better look at the teenagers earlier, or even counted the number of them. The only thing she knew for sure was it was a mixed gender group of three to five. She'd been more focused on the Trollhunter. Not focused enough as it was, but Stricklander didn't need to know any of that.

"A group of them, young, probably around the Trollhunter's age, I could be persuaded to tell you more if I...."

She trailed off. Stricklander didn't move, standing still as a statue, watching her with calm passivity.

Her heart sank "You knew."

A mild grin broke through his veneer of composure "Don't be too hard on yourself, I've known about our Trollhunter's companions for quite some time now,"

This time she wasn't able to stop the glow flashing in her sclera, the lapse in control infuriating her even more. Hands balled into trembling fists, whole body simmering with rage.

She was such an idiot! Stricklander didn't come here to berate her, he came here to confirm what she'd seen. What he already knew.

Just like that her intel was worthless. She only knew that a small group of human teens was helping the Trollhunter. Which meant that Stricklander already knew their full names, home addresses, and social security numbers.

"Still moving me to scouting duty?" she growled through gritted teeth.

Stricklander, the insufferable prick who actually was as smart as he thought he was, had the nerve to chuckle "No not just yet. I believe as long as you're...discreet about tonight's incident I can be persuaded to keep you where you are,"

Translation. Don't spread what you learned around and I won't cause problems for you.

"Well consider my lips sealed," she narrowed her eyes at him "So what are you actually planning on doing about the hunter's human lackeys?"

"Oh don't worry your head about it," he oh so casually wiped dust off the edge of an unpacked bridge stone "Though I suppose tonight's incident has moved up my plans a bit, it's nothing to concern yourself with,"

Translation. I have a scheme in progress but I'm not telling you shit.

"Fine, whatever, do what you want," she bent down and picked up another crate "I'll just stay here unpacking boxes and guarding rocks,"

"Excellent," Stricklander chuckled again "See that you do, but I think you should stash the bridge away for the time being, in case our young hunter and their merry band recognized something they shouldn't have tonight,"

Nomura actually staggered, nearly dropping the crate in her arms. No-- they couldn't have...could they? The hunter hadn't gotten close but she hadn't kept track of the humans. Even if they didn't recognize it one of them might have snapped a photo to show the hunter later. It had never even occurred to her that the hunter or the teens might have recognized Kilahead for what it--

"But I did."

She whipped her head around, startled enough to actually stare at him in open mouthed shock for a few seconds. Stricklander smirking back at her. He couldn't read minds, she knew he couldn't, but times like this, when he could read people so well and respond to what they were thinking without them even saying a word, was why the rumor that he could still persisted.

"I'll leave the task in your capable hands," Stricklander turned and started striding away "And see that you keep better control of the goblins this time,"

His footsteps trailed into silence, leaving Nomura alone with the

stones and the boxes.

With a shriek she hurled the crate in her arms to the ground, wood shattering against marble.

Stupid!

Chapter End Notes

The plot is moving along but there's also a lot of fun worldbuilding details here!

As a globe spanning species that lives for centuries, trolls have literally thousands of languages and dialects. Common trollish is the language of trade that most tribes try to keep up with to communicate/trade with other tribes. In the pub Blinky and AAARRRGHH were speaking common trollish but in an archaic dialect (closest comparison I can think of is modern English vs Shakespearean/Ye olden days English) to avoid casual eavesdropping. They were arguing about the kids being too young to learn about changelings, and the word 'unclean' Claire heard was actually 'impure'. Old languages don't have non-slur words for changelings.

And Blinky setting up a room trying to accommodate his human students shows that he understands the 'what's of a lot of human customs, but not the 'why's. He knows humans like to sleep individually, but also doesn't realize a group that sleeps individually would also prefer individual private spaces, and that sleeping on a rounded surface long term will destroy their spines. But it's important to note that this isn't ego or arrogance on Blinky's part, it's excitement. He's just so thrilled about creating a space for his students to rest, set up with human comfort and safety in mind, he gets carried away it completely slips his mind to actually ask his charges what would work best for them (AAARRRGHH is the only reason the whole space isn't covered wall to wall in bearskin rugs).

The gang might have decided to have the human half of the team take a step back from being on the front lines to taking a more supportive role, but they don't realize that decision has already been taken away from them. Strickler's known about the kids'

involvement for a while, and now that Nomura knows to he's going to put his intel into action. The kids are all guilty of compartmentalizing their lives to a dangerous degree. They think they can keep troll stuff and human stuff completely separate, hunt goblins by night and go to school by day. In a way they consider their 'human' lives their safe escape from the world of trolls. But Pandora's box has already been opened, and pretty soon they'll realize there's no part of their lives untouched by danger.

Next time, target update late July/early August: After a nap in Trollmarket the kids head home, surely nothing else bad can happen tonight?

End Notes

Relationships and more characters will be tagged as they become relevant.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!